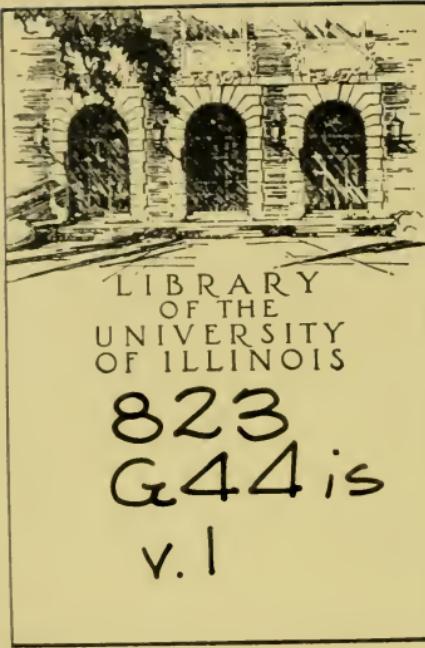


Pickford Robert Waller



ISABEL CLARENCE.



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ISABEL CLARENDON

BY

GEORGE GISSING.

In Two Volumes.

VOL. I.

“C’était plus qu’une vie, hélas ! c’était un monde
Qui s’était effacé !”

LONDON : CHAPMAN AND HALL,
LIMITED.

1886.

CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
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ISABEL CLARENCE.

CHAPTER I.

FROM Salcot East to Winstoke there are two roads, known respectively as the old and the new. The latter was made about the middle of the present century; the old road is immemorial. By the modern highway the distance between the two parishes is rather less than five miles; pursue the other, and you fetch a compass of well-nigh ten, taking into account all the inexplicable windings and angularities between the "White Hart Inn" at Salcot, where the roads disdainfully part company, to Winstoke Rectory, where they unite and form the village street. It says much for ancestral leisureliness in that north-west corner of —shire, that the old way ever established itself, or, being established, was used to so recent a date; on the other hand, the construction of the new thoroughfare looks remarkably like a

practical joke, perpetrated at their own expense by the good people of the country side, seeing that this activity displayed itself just when it was least called for. Formerly, there was a silk manufactory at Salcot East, and direct communication with the neighbouring parish would have been a convenience ; only when the industry in question had fallen into complete decay, and when it could not matter to any one whether it took one hour or two to reach Winstoke (where not even a market was held), did the inhabitants tax themselves for the great undertaking.

As regards picturesqueness, needless to say that the old road has enormously the advantage. A pedestrian with time on his hands and walking for walking's sake, could not hesitate between the hard white turnpike, running on into level distance between dusty hedge-rows, and that charming glimpse of elm-shadowed lane, grass creeping from the densely verdurous bank on either side to the deep moistened ruts, and, twenty yards away, a sudden turn round a fantastic oak, all beyond a delightful uncertainty. Such a pedestrian was Bernard Kingcote, a man neither too old nor too busy to be rambling aimlessly on this Midsummer Day ; over his shoulders a small knapsack, with a waterproof strapped upon it,

in his hand a stick he had cut from an oak-tree. Since eleven in the morning the sun had shone as in England it shines but rarely—a steady force of fire which drew the perspiration from every pore of one standing unshaded. Under these circumstances, Kingcote had loitered about Salcot all the day, having reached the place after a four-mile stroll from another little town where he had passed the preceding night. There were leafy lurking-places here and there along the banks of the stream called Sale, and the "White Hart" gave promise of a comfortable, homely meal at mid-day. The time passed pleasantly enough till late afternoon, for he had a couple of books in his knapsack, and made purchase of another in a musty little shop full of miscellaneous rubbish, into which he was tempted by the sight of a shelf of ragged volumes ; then came tea at the "White Hart" again, and he was ready, after a survey of his Ordnance map, to use the cool of the evening for a ramble on to Winstoke. But as he came forth from the inn, unexpected entertainment presented itself. A dancing bear had just been led into the town, and the greater part of the population had assembled in the broad street to watch the poor dusty-coated beast. With a humorous sadness on his countenance, Kingcote stood in the doorway, observant of the

artificial biped and the natural ones which surrounded it. As he waited, a trifling incident occurred which afterwards came back to his memory with more significance than he had attributed to it at the time ; somebody jolted against him from behind, and then a country fellow of evil appearance staggered out of the inn and mixed with the crowd ; he was seemingly half-drunk, or but just awakened.

This gave the pedestrian the impulse needed to send him forth on his way. He looked for a moment along the new road, then his eyes wandered to the old, and he turned at once into the latter. There was a sign-post at the parting ; both its arms said, "To Winstoke," but one was crumbling, fungus-scored, its inscription barely legible ; the other a stout piece of timber, self-assertive, with rounded ends and freshly painted in black and white. Kingcote passed with a mental comment.

The road was just what it promised, perfectly rural, sweet with all summer growths, seldom without trees on both sides, ash predominating, oak and holly frequent. It mounted little hills where the least turn would have enabled it to keep level ; oftener still made a curve or a corner, to all appearances merely for the sake of constructing an exquisite little picture of banks and boughs and luxuriant vegetation.

At times nothing was to be seen for the robust old hedges ; then would come a peep over open country, a stretch of yellow fields bounded far away by the bare chalk-hills. No cottages, no trim borders of stately parks, seldom a gate giving into a grass meadow. It seemed that no one ever came this way ; the new road had monopolised traffic of every kind. The gnats began to swarm ; here and there a spider, acting with the assurance of long impunity, had carried his invisible silken thread right across the road ; the birds were softening their multitudinous voices to sunset. Now and then was heard a sound of deep, steady breathing from behind the hedge, and an odour of warm, sweet breath filled the air ; it was a cow that lay there chewing the cud. Or a horse, turned out to grass, would put his head up and look over into the lane, half-alarmed at the approach of a human being. The pedestrian had a friendly word for him.

Kingcote's way of walking was that of a man accustomed to his own society ; he advanced slowly, yet without pauses, and often became forgetful of the things about him. His face was neither sad nor cheerful, but the tendency of its free play of feature was clearly in the direction rather of the former than of the latter expression. It was plain that he enjoyed

to the full the scenes through which he passed, and enjoyed them as a man of poetic sensibilities, but there was no exuberance of vitality in his delight. He looked like one who had been walking all through the heat of the day, and was growing weary for his night's retreat. Evidently he had nothing of the naturalist's instinct ; he never bent to examine a flower or leaf, and he could not indeed have assigned its name to any but the commonest ; the very trees whose beauty dwelt longest in his eye did not suggest to him their own familiar appellations. To judge from his countenance, the communing which he held with himself was constant and lively ; at times words even fell from his lips. It was not the face of a man at ease with his own heart, or with the circumstances amid which his life had fallen. A glance of pleasure hither or thither was often succeeded by the shadow of brooding, and this by a gleam of passion, brief but significant enough. This inward energy was brought to view on features sufficiently remote from any ordinary stamp to prove interesting in themselves ; they were those of a young man—Kingcote was not quite thirty.

When he had been walking for a couple of hours, his thoughts began to turn to his plans for the following day ; he took the map out again, and examined it as he proceeded. He

had been away from home—from London—three days ; to-morrow would be Friday, and on Saturday he proposed to return. There came into his mind a question about money, and he felt for his purse. For the first time he came to a standstill ; neither in the wonted pocket nor anywhere else was his purse to be found. It had contained all his immediate resources, with the exception of a few loose coppers. Then it was that the course of reflection brought him back to that incident in the doorway of the “White Hart,” and he felt little doubt that the seemingly drunken boor who pushed against him had in the same moment dexterously picked his pocket. The purse had been safe when he paid his bill at the inn, and certainly he had not left it behind him by accident. At all events, purse and money were gone, and it was not our friend’s temper to fall into useless lamentation over irremediable accidents. If, indeed, the case were one of theft—and no other explanation seemed possible—he wished the rascal luck of his three pounds or so, and, walking slowly on again, began to ask himself what was to be done.

To stop at Winstoke, take up quarters there at an inn, and wait till money could be sent to him from London, was the course which naturally first suggested itself. Yet the reasons against it were not long in being discovered.

What guarantee could he give to his landlord—short of remaining shut up in the inn all day—of his honest intention to pay when money arrived? His knapsack and three old books were not much of a pledge. Another would perchance have never given this matter a thought, but a feature of Kingcote's character was concerned in it. He was too proud to subject himself to possible suspicion, especially that of his social inferiors; to explain his position to an innkeeper would have galled him exceedingly, still more so to live for a day under the innkeeper's eyes without an explanation. Things which most men accept as the every-day rubs of the world were to Kingcote among the worst evils of existence; the most ordinary transaction with uneducated and (as he held) presumably uncivilised persons at all times made him uncomfortable, and a necessity such as the present assailed his fastidiousness with no little severity. He reopened his map, and began to calculate the possibility of walking straight on to London. There was no possibility in the matter. He might sleep in the open air this midsummer night, and it would be rather pleasant than otherwise, but the situation would only be complicated by the pressing need of breakfast in the morning. Was there nothing for it but to face the innkeeper?

He moved on, and a turn in the road exposed a scene which for the moment made him lose sight of his annoyances. He had suddenly come in full view of a cottage, and, it seemed to him, a cottage of ideal rusticity. It was very old, built of brick which had become finely toned wherever it was not hidden by ivy, and the tiles of the roof were patched with richest hues of moss and lichen ; its low upper storey had two dormer windows. The dwelling lay a few yards back from the road, and in the middle of the grass before the door stood the bowed trunk of an old, old oak-tree, branchless, hollow, killed by the parasites which clung about it in astonishing luxuriance. To the rear of the cottage, which seemed to be uninhabited, grew a cluster of tall trees, with a quantity of bushy undergrowth ; the tree-tops were black with rooks' nests, and the birds themselves were loud in talk. This scene, with its background of magnificent evening sky above remote hills of the intensest blue, might well have brought the pedestrian to a pause ; it was something else, however, that checked him with a movement of surprise. He was no longer alone with nature ; facing the cottage sat a girl, busy over a water-colour sketch ; she was working with rapid eagerness, and, as she sat with her back to him, she could not see,

and had not heard, his approach. Kingcote would have liked to stay here awhile, but the stranger's presence made it difficult. Taking a step or two onwards, he speedily drew her attention ; she suspended the work of her pencil and looked quickly round. Kingcote experienced a sense of profound disappointment ; far from being in harmony with the scene, the face presented to him was irregular in feature and harsh in expression ; the eyes seemed very large, and, having met his, did not at once remove themselves, but continued to gaze with something like defiance, whilst the lips worked in a curiously nervous way, not at all pleasant to watch. She was perhaps nineteen ; her dress very plain, but that of a lady. With the observance of these details, Kingcote walked past her at a sharp pace, and did not venture to stay his steps again till the ever-winding road had taken him from the sketcher's sight.

"I never saw so uninteresting a girl," was his first thought, but it had scarcely passed through his mind when he felt that its hastiness did not in truth embody his impression. To say that he had never seen a less pleasing girl would be more accurate. A merely uninteresting face would not at once, and so forcibly, have printed itself upon his memory ; he already felt

that the unpropitiating gaze of those large, cold eyes would remain long with him. He wondered who she might be. Certainly no conventional young lady who came out to sketch in a feeble way, in the ordinary course of her mild domestic existence ; more likely than that, a professional artist, or one studying to become such. There had been no opportunity for a glance at her work, but the earnestness with which she gave herself up to it inspired a certain confidence as to the results. Whence did she come, dressed as if for a brief walk, with her camp stool and sketching apparatus ?

One more, and this the last, turn of the old road showed that she need not have come any very great distance. Kingcote found himself entering Winstoke. On his left hand was the village church, a low edifice with a solid, square tower, and, just beyond it, what was evidently the rectory. These occupied the angle made by the two roads as they reunited. Across the churchyard and the rectory garden was visible the white dust of the turnpike, along which on the further side ran a high brick wall capped with tiles, the enclosure of private grounds. The rectory thus stood with its back to the church ; its front windows looked upon a large open space, grass-grown and shadowed with fine trees, the whole surrounded

with iron chains loosely swinging from post to post. On the left proceeded the high wall just mentioned, leading to gates and a lodge ; the dense foliage of a well-wooded park rose behind it. To the right stood a few picturesque houses, with little gardens before them. Straight on lay the main street of the village, the yellow-washed fronts vanishing at length amid yet more trees. Children were playing on the enclosed grass, and with their voices mingled the notes of a piano from an open window near at hand. It was all very beautiful in the light of sunset. For a minute or two Kingcote stood with a face of contentment, soothed and restful.

It was half-past eight ; the chiming of the church clock proclaimed it. If he intended to pass the night in Winstoke it was time to make up his mind where he should seek quarters. He began to stray round the enclosure towards the houses of the street, walking slowly and with frequent stoppings, beginning at length to feel the full annoyance of his position, and in his somewhat hasty way inwardly cursing the whole social constitution which made such a disagreeable experience possible. As he drew near the lodge gates in the high wall, he perceived a handsome drinking fountain, built of marble and set in the wall itself. He was thirsty, and

went to take a draught of water. Above the basin was an inscription, carved in old English letters, "The Knight's Well," and a recent date beneath it. The name struck him pleasantly; no doubt there was some legend attached to it, which he promised himself to seek out. He drank with delight of the sweet, cold water, and was about to fill the cup a second time, when a little boy, who had come up to his side unobserved, a youngster of six or seven, addressed him with curious gravity.

"That water is enchanted," said the child. "I wouldn't drink more than one if I was you."

Kingcote laughed with pleasure.

"Enchanted?" he exclaimed. "I feared there was none such left in the world. How do you know it is?"

The child was neatly dressed in light summer clothing, in knickerbockers, and round his waist was a green sash which held a toy bugle. He looked up with bright, intelligent eyes, not quite certain how to take the stranger's laughter.

"I know," he replied, "because my father has told me. One cup does you good, but after the first——"

He paused and shook his head. Possibly the evils which would result from a

second draught were but darkly vague in his imagination.

"Who is your father?" Kingcote inquired after a moment's reflection.

"My father is the rector," was the little fellow's reply, not without dignity. Even as he spoke he caught sight of a lady and a gentleman walking towards them, the attire of the latter proclaiming the rector himself. The child at once drew out his bugle and blew a joyous blast of welcome—tarantar-ar-a!

"This is my father coming," he then explained to Kingcote. "Ask him about the Knight's Well, and he'll tell you, I've no doubt."

And he ran off to meet the pair. Already Kingcote had perceived that the lady was she whom he had passed in the lane. The reverend gentleman had relieved her of the camp-stool, and was talking in the manner of one who enjoys the exercise of his own voice, with something, too, of the tone and aspect observable in men who believe themselves not on the whole disagreeable to ladies. He seemed to be just on the hither side of middle age, had a very fresh complexion, and kept drawing himself up to the limit of his five feet six, like one who wishes to correct a habit of stooping. As he talked, he held his glasses in one hand, and with

them tapped the other ; the camp-stool was pressed under his left arm.

Kingcote drew aside, as if he would walk over to the enclosure. At the lodge gates the two paused ; the clergyman was politely insisting on carrying the camp-stool up to the house, the young lady refusing with rather a hard smile. Kingcote saw now that she was tall, and held herself with the grace of strong and shapely limbs. When she had persuaded the rector to take his leave, and was on the point of entering the gates, she turned half round, and Kingcote once more found the large eyes fixed full upon him. She cast the glance without any embarrassment, and, having satisfied her curiosity, walked on and disappeared.

The rector and his little boy, to whom the young lady had paid no attention, came away and walked towards the rectory. Kingcote could see that the child was speaking of him. On the spur of a sudden determination, he followed, coming up to the two just as they reached the house. With a courteous raising of his hat, he begged the favour of a few words with the clergyman.

“ By all means, sir,” was the genial response. “ Be off to bed, Percy ; you’ve no business to be up at this hour, you rascal.”

The boy blew a farewell blast and ran

round to a garden entrance at the side of the house.

"Let us enter," said the clergyman—Mr. Vissian was his name—when he had taken another look at the stranger.

This was better than discussing awkward matters in the open street. Kingcote found himself with satisfaction in a cosy study, the windows of which looked upon a trim garden with a view of the church beyond. Requested to seat himself, he told, as well as he could, the story of his lost purse, dwelling on the humorous features of his situation, and frankly avowing the reasons which led him to apply to the rector of the parish rather than establish himself at an inn and wait for a remittance. Would Mr. Vissian lend him a sum of money sufficient for the night's expenses and for return to London on the morrow?

"With pleasure I will do so," responded the clergyman at once, plunging both hands into his trouser pockets. Then his face darkened. "I—really—" he began with hesitation, "that is if I—. Pray have the goodness to excuse me for a moment," he added with a jerk, and, his face reddening a little, he hurried out of the room.

Kingcote wondered what this might mean. Was it prudence coming rather late, or un-

anticipated poverty ? He rose and looked at the volumes on the shelves behind him. They were not the kind of books one ordinarily finds in a country rector's library ; instead of commentators and sermons there were rows of old English play-books beautifully bound—the collection of an enthusiast in such matters. The binding of a complete set of Dodsley was engaging his admiration when Mr. Vissian returned.

"Do you think a pound would suffice to your needs ?" the clergyman asked, still rather disturbed in countenance.

"Amply," Kingcote hastened to reply ; hesitation being impossible under the circumstances.

"You—you are quite sure ?"

"Quite. I am greatly indebted to your kindness."

Mr. Vissian held out a sovereign with a smile of embarrassment ; the other took it, and, to get past the delicate point, remarked with a glance at the book-shelves :

"You are interested in dramatic literature, I see. Pray let me show you something I picked up in a shop at Salcot this morning."

He quickly unstrapped his knapsack, and extracted from it a thin, backless book, the outside leaves crumpled and dirty, and held it out to the rector. Mr. Vissian had put on his

glasses, and took the offered object with an expression of dubious curiosity. Could any good thing come out of Salcot East? But at the first sight of the title-page he positively flushed with excitement. It was the first edition of Otway's "Venice Preserved."

"You found this in Salcot?" he exclaimed.
"My good sir, what did you give for it?"

"The sum of one penny," replied Kingcote, with a smile. "It was stuffed among a lot of trash; but for want of something to do I should never have looked through the heap."

"By the Turk!" Mr. Vissian ejaculated.
"'As it is acted at the Duke's Theatre . . .
Printed for Jos. Hindmarsh at the sign of the
"Black Bull," over against the Royal Exchange
in Cornhill. 1682.' Upon my word!"

He chuckled with gleeful appreciation; something of envy too was in the side glance he threw upon the happy possessor. Forthwith he became as friendly and unconstrained as if he had known Kingcote for years. Taking from his pocket a bunch of delicate little keys, he stepped up to a book-case with a glass front, opened it with care, and began to draw forth the treasures. He was boy-like in the exuberance of his zeal, rubbed his hands, uttered crows and chirpings, and grew the more delighted the more he became aware of his guest's

congenial tastes. Kingcote was nothing of a genuine book-hunter; his years and temperament preserved him from that delightful pedantry; but he knew and enjoyed the literature in question. More than an hour passed in talk; it grew all but dark.

"We must have a light," cried Mr. Vissian.

"Is it not time that I saw after my room at the inn?" Kingcote asked, looking at his watch.

"Inn? Ah! to be sure. But—if I might offer—really I wish you'd let us give you a bed here for the night. It would save trouble."

"On the contrary, I fear it would give trouble somewhat needlessly."

But Mr. Vissian insisted.

"I will give directions at once. It must be supper time too. Mrs. Vissian has thought me busy, I fear, and has let the usual hour go by. Pray come into the sitting-room. It's a year since I had any one to chat with over these things. It does me good; it does me good."

In the sitting-room supper was already spread—plain bread and cheese and draught ale. In an arm-chair, busy with sewing, sat the rector's wife. She looked very youthful, and was indeed only five-and-twenty, having

been married at seventeen. She was delicate, pretty, and a trifle troubled in face.

"A friend of mine, dear," said the rector, with an affectionate courtesy which pleased Kingcote, "who will remain with us for the night."

Mrs. Vissian looked just a little startled, but speedily put on pleasant smiles, and went away to make her necessary preparations. On her return the talk turned to the son of the house, Master Percy.

"What did he mean," Kingcote asked, "by telling me that the water of the Knight's Well was enchanted, and that you must not drink more than one cup?"

Father and mother broke into laughter.

"You thought it an interesting local legend, no doubt," said Mr. Vissian. "I am sorry to disabuse you. That enchantment is merely a sanitary precaution of my own. It's not good for the child to drink much of the water this hot weather, so I hit on a device which has proved more efficacious than anything more literal would have done."

"But is there no legend connected with the well?" Kingcote asked.

"Oh yes. The spring has doubtless been used for centuries. I will show you the story, after supper, in the county history. The marble

basin was built five years ago by Mrs. Clarendon, the lady who lives at the house over there, which is itself called Knightswell."

"The lady," Kingcote asked quickly, "whom I saw entering the gates?"

"No, no," corrected Mr. Vissian, with a smile, "Mrs. Clarendon is in London. That was Miss Warren, a—a distant relation."

"A very different person from Mrs. Clarendon," put in Mrs. Vissian, in a low voice.

The rector murmured assent.

"It was Miss Warren, then," Kingcote pursued, "whom I saw sketching a charming cottage in the lane not far away. What an exquisite spot that is!"

"Wood End—yes. The trees there are all that remains of a forest."

"The cottage is vacant, isn't it?"

"Yes, has been for a year. A labourer and his family left and went to Canada ; Mrs. Clarendon gave the poor people the means to emigrate, and we hear they are already doing well."

"No one whom Mrs. Clarendon helps fails to do so," remarked the rector's wife.

"What may be the rent of such a cottage?" Kingcote inquired carelessly, leaning back in his chair.

"Half-a-crown a week is what Yardley wants for that, I think," replied the rector.

The guest sat upright.

"Half-a-crown? A delightful little place like that! Six pounds ten a year?"

"I believe so."

They were rising from the table. Kingcote stood in his place, meditating. Mrs. Vissian again left the room.

"Suppose," began Kingcote at length, "one took a fancy to live in that cottage, would it be possible to find a labourer's wife—or some person of that kind—to come and give one say an hour's service daily?"

"Very possible, I should say," returned the rector, with some surprise. "Do you contemplate such a step?"

"One might do worse, I fancy," was Kingcote's only reply.

Mrs. Vissian returned, bringing with her a large volume, the county history of which her husband had spoken.

"Always thoughtful, and always helpful," said the rector, with a smile which made his face look wonderfully good. "Thank you, Lucy. Now you shall read us the story yourself, if you will give us that pleasure."

Mrs. Vissian consented with a pretty blush. The story told how, in the troublous times of King Stephen, there stood in this place the stronghold of a great baron, who, shortly after

he had wedded a noble and beautiful lady, fell in combat with another lord, the origin of their quarrel being obscure, and, indeed, nothing to the point. The lady, thus widowed, shut herself up in her castle and refused to yield to the victor, who had been one of many rejected suitors for her hand in former days, and now saw his opportunity of forcing her to become his wife. The stronghold being closely beleaguered for many days, and the garrison, too weak to make an effective sortie, already nigh to starvation, by the interposition of Providence there appeared upon the scene a certain knight, who also had been one of the lady's wooers, and who, in despair at her refusal of him, had betaken himself to fight in the Holy Land. Thence he was even now returned with a good band of tried followers. Learning how matters stood, he forthwith gave battle to the besiegers, hoping to rescue the lady he still loved, or, if that might not be, willing and glad to yield his life in her service. As indeed he did, for though victorious in the conflict, he was at the last moment mortally pierced by an arrow. In the ardour of pursuing the foe, his men lost sight of their leader; the wounded knight dragged himself to a spring hard by, and whilst endeavouring to slake his thirst, bled to faintness and so died. There his body

was found by the lady of the castle when she came forth to give due thanks to her deliverer. In memory of his devotion, she built a basin of fair stone to gather the waters of the spring, and from that day forth it was known as the *Knight's Well*.

"We always call Mrs. Clarendon 'the lady of Knightswell,'" said Mrs. Vissian, when she had ceased to read.

"The name is a beautiful one," said Kingcote. "It suggests a fair and gracious and noble woman."

"Exactly what it should suggest," returned the lady, with a pleased laugh.

"And who is the lord of Knightswell?" asked the guest.

"There is none," the rector made answer. "Mrs. Clarendon has been a widow for a long time. But what say you to a pipe before bed-time, and a look at one or two old books? My dear Lucy," he exclaimed, turning to his wife, "our friend has just captured a first edition of the 'Venice Preserved.' And *where*, think you? In a miserable shop in Salcot East!—And *what for*, think you? One penny, by the Turk! One penny!"

Mrs. Vissian smiled, but at the same time shook her head; and Kingcote wondered why.

An hour later he was alone in a little bed-

chamber which looked out from the front of the house. The sun had been so strong upon the roof all day that this upper room was over-heated ; he extinguished the light as soon as possible, and sat down to get a breath of fresh air at the open window. His eyes turned in the direction of Knightswell. The east lay over there, and already it seemed as though a new day were beginning to touch the heavens ; there was a broad region of delicate dusky pink above the dark tops of trees, and outlined against it was visible the roof of Mrs. Clarendon's house. There was no shining of the moon, and but few stars anywhere in the sky ; the night throbbed with a passion of silence. Just as Kingcote's eyes perceived the gables of Knightswell, somewhere in the park broke forth the song of a nightingale. For many minutes an unbroken stream of melody flooded the darkness ; he all but sobbed in listening. Pain of the past and anguish of longing to the years which waited with unknown gifts of fate made his heart tumultuous. The kindness he had met with touched him ; he had tender thoughts of the good rector and his sweet-faced, girlish wife. He loved this place ; Knightswell was musical in his ears ; he longed to see that gentle lady whose title has such a pleasant and stately sound of romance,

and of whom such good things were spoken. As the nightingale sang he kept repeating to himself her name, "the Lady of Knightswell." She had been a widow for a long time, said the rector; yet they had not spoken of her as of one who was old. He pictured to himself the fair, sweet, queenly woman whom that name would become.

The bird ceased. Over the country passed a leafy murmur, a hushed whisper of the tall dark trees, growing to a sigh, almost to a low wail, dying over Knightswell. Then an owl hooted thrice. The night had turned cold.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN Isabel Maddison married Mr. Clarendon she was generally esteemed, among such as had any interest in the matter, a highly fortunate young woman. Handsome, penniless, but nineteen years old, at a step she had achieved social apotheosis. Six months prior to the event Isabel had been on the point of accepting an engagement as a governess at a salary of twenty-six pounds a year. By agreeing to the alternative proposal she became wife of a county member, mistress of a mansion in Mayfair and of a delightful estate in —shire, presumptive possessor, before many years should have passed, of a fortune solidly correspondent with such show of dignity. Whatever might be the drawbacks, there was much to be said for the bargain.

The event was not as entirely romantic as it might have been ; she was not positively discovered with ink-stained fingers among school-

girls' copy-books, and carried off by a masterful passion to grace a London season. The kindly interposition of a certain Lady Kent, an old friend of her mother's, bridged the gulf between social impossibility and that respectable limbo where every aspiration is sanctioned and a dutiful waiting upon Providence is taught to ally itself with the graces of self-assertion. Isabel was the daughter of a country solicitor, who, dying before middle age, left a widow and two children, a freehold worth about thirty-five pounds a year, and a policy of life insurance for two thousand pounds. Mrs. Maddison thus found herself not particularly well provided for, and, but for the assistance of a brother who farmed some three hundred acres in the same county, would have been at a loss how to educate her boy of ten and bring up (we do not speak of education in the case of girls) her little Bella of seven. With all the aid that others were able or disposed to render, the first years of widowhood saw a good deal of pinching and struggling in the home, which had to be kept on a footing of gentility with firm resistance of that terrible temptation, encroachment upon capital. The boy Richard eventually went to learn farming with his uncle, and, at the latter's death, being then nearly twenty, made use of a legacy of a hundred pounds to transport himself

to Australia, where he flourished among sheep. Isabel was then seventeen. Her mother also received a small legacy at the uncle's decease, and it was decided to use this in "finishing off" Isabel, that is to say, in giving her a year or so of that kind of training which would enable her to earn her living as a governess.

Already there was an alternative. The gentleman who had succeeded to Mr. Maddison's practice, or rather, who had managed to establish one where only a shadow had existed, had kept an eye on Isabel through these past ten years, and, now that the girl was to be sent away from home, astonished both her and her mother by a proposal of marriage. He was a young Irishman, blessed with much self-confidence, and holding it for a certainty that he was destined to become Attorney-General. When Isabel reported the proposal to her mother she could scarcely speak for laughter. Mrs. Maddison was grave, and wanted time to think. But Isabel looked in the mirror over the mantelpiece, laughed yet more, and there was an end of the matter.

She went away to school, and remained there for a year and a half. Then it was that Lady Kent, now for two years a widow, her husband having died after a weary invalid vegetation at German baths, came to pay visits in

her native county, and renewed a long-interrupted friendship with Mrs. Maddison. The two had been neighbours as children, had married about the same time—the one her luckless solicitor, the other a baronet who promised to live a year and lingered nearly twenty—and now, in spite of social differences, found that they still had a kindness for each other. Isabel was at home, advertising and answering advertisements. The first glance at this young lady satisfied Lady Kent that the projects in hand were not promising.

"I doubt whether any one will have her," she said to Mrs. Maddison. "I'm sure I wouldn't."

The poor lady looked up in astonishment at so unkind a speech.

"My dear," explained the woman of the world, "she is far too good-looking, has too much blood, doesn't at all belong to the governess breed. I would say, don't let her be thrown away, if I were not sure better things were in store for her."

What these better things might be it was not difficult to imagine; but the chance of their attainment seemed so remote that Mrs. Maddison was half disposed to resent such remarks as gratuitous cruelty. Lady Kent went away and reflected. She paid another visit in

a day or two, and brought forth a startling proposal.

"I have no children of my own," she said, "and I shan't marry again—had enough of it. Let me take Bella to London and give her a season."

"But how will that——"

"Never mind; let us trust in Providence. She'll be none the worse, in any case. Depend upon it, she won't be a governess; and for looking about one London is the only place."

Mrs. Maddison shook her head. Her troubles were increased by the arrival just then of that offer of a place at six-and-twenty pounds. Isabel knew nothing of Lady Kent's proposal, and was willing to go away; but the mother's heart had been set in commotion by her friend's talk. There were days of miserable uncertainty, and ultimately Isabel herself was taken into consultation. Lady Kent, who was greatly struck with the girl, and foresaw congenial excitement in a plan which her native kindness made agreeable, repeated her proposal in serious form. Isabel (so she spoke in private to Mrs. Maddison) was made to shine in society. She had just been "finished off" with the ordinary accomplishments, and if she now "came out" there was much probability of her attracting a suitable husband. She should

not incur the least danger, that Lady Kent would guarantee. What was the use of beauty to a poor girl if not to get her an establishment in life? There was no disgrace in standing up and proclaiming oneself to be disposed of; the folly and the danger would lie in trying to keep out of sight. Whether was it better, to be pursued by rascals as a beautiful governess, or to meet face to face with honest men who would be likely to fall in love with beauty for its own sake, or at all events be willing to purchase it respectably? In this way was the mother talked into compliance. Isabel herself had only to subdue her exultation. With the beginning of the season she and Lady Kent opened the campaign together.

The details are not of importance. The seat of war is a familiar region to my readers, and the engagements reported year after year so closely resemble each other that they have become by this time rather tedious in the chronicling. Lady Kent's prophecy was fulfilled. Isabel had at least three possible offers, and she selected that of Mr. Eustace Clarendon. For this gentleman's qualifications see above.

For the girl was charming; not beautiful as yet, that was to come later; but so blest with sweetness of virginal feature, so radiant with the joy of maiden health, so abundant in

graceful and dainty instincts, with so rapturous a smile, with a laugh which came so direct from the source of nature's music, that her presence smote upon the heart like very sunshine. It mattered not where or when she was discovered, her grace was perfect. In a week she had all the pretty artificialities of the town in complete possession; one would have thought she had been born and bred in the atmosphere of refined insincerity. When she appeared on the Row, who would have thought that she had learned her riding on a saddleless colt at her uncle's farm? When she laughingly consented to play to a few friends, it certainly did not suggest itself that she had toiled at the instrument in order to teach children for six-and-twenty pounds a year. She was, as Lady Kent had seen, born for society; it was her element; it brought out all that was best and loveliest in her; it made her a complete being. Society could not give her more than it was in her to produce; but on the other hand, it planted not one seed of alien evil. Pure-minded she left her home, and, without a shadow on the purity of her thought, she entered the home of the man who had won so priceless a treasure. Throughout her life it was to be the same. Suffering what was in her to suffer, growing in self-knowledge, growing in tenderness of soul

and in outward perfection, always a queen of society, always making her food of the best that mere society had to offer, Isabel Clarendon was but Isabel Maddison ripened and subdued in maturity of charm. Not the greatest and highest among women ; falling short of much that marks the noblest woman-soul ; failing in force, failing in courage, with eyes too level on the surface of this world, but woman womanly in every fraction of her being, and, as such, infinite in suggestiveness, infinite in lovableness.

Of the two offers which Isabel declined, only one concerns us. One evening early in the season she was taken down to dinner by a gentleman named Asquith. They were introduced to each other just as the movement from the drawing-room began, and the mention of their respective names brought a look of surprise to either face.

“Have I not,” asked Mr. Asquith, “the honour and pleasure of being related to you? Are we not cousins in some degree or other?”

“I really believe we are,” Isabel replied, with her irresistible smile. “At least, I suppose you belong to the family of which I have heard.”

“And assuredly I hope that you belong to the family of which *I* have heard,” said the young man, whose arm trembled sensibly as she put her hand upon it.

Question and answer brought about a satisfactory establishment of identity, and the pleasure which Isabel experienced, without attempt at concealment, in having found a kinsman who belonged of right to the fashionable world, was anything but disagreeable to the kinsman himself. The Asquiths were connections of Mr. Maddison, but the family had been in Canada for many years, and since their return of late to England, had not come in contact with the widow and her children. Robert Asquith was three-and-twenty, without any definite occupation, save that he was nominally reading for the Bar, and possessed of an income of five hundred a year, which was not likely to grow to anything more respectable until he should perchance inherit from his father—a hale man with a number of daughters to look after. Very likely Isabel was just a little to blame for what ensued. Glad of having found a relation, she perhaps laid upon the frail tie of consanguinity rather more stress than it could be reasonably expected to bear, allowed, perhaps, rather too much of cousinly intimacy to forthwith establish itself, and, in pure innocence, gave Robert Asquith too much reason to believe that his society was agreeable to her for its own sake. She was never a coquette ; but a man had to be as free-thoughted and sunny-tempered as

herself to endure the halcyon weather of her intimate friendliness and not be tempted to change a smile for a sigh. Robert was specially exposed to such temptation, for he had rather more than average self-esteem, knew himself to be good-looking, and, despite his tatterdemalion five hundred a year, for the most part bore the attitude of a man who is looking deliberately about him to throw his handkerchief to the fairest and best, sure of its being eagerly stooped for. Of course he was conscious of an understanding that the fairest and best would, in the nature of things, have a gold pedestal for her loveliness, and, of all young men, he seemed the last to forget this essential element of womanly charm. There was a breezy coolness about him, a leisureliness of temperament manifesting itself for instance in perfection of toilette, a touch of ironical humour in his mode of speech, which from the first gave to Isabel a sense of safety in accepting his attentions. Lady Kent, of course, discovered at once the details of Mr. Asquith's position, and, in her lightly suggestive way, imparted the information to Isabel. But the latter smiled at the thought of Robert's seeking such a wife; she felt she understood him better than that. As it happened, she did not. Possibly she failed by miscalculation of her own witchery. However it came about,

there, at length, was Robert Asquith at her feet, offering her, with a modesty she had not given him credit for, the devotion of his life. With a surprised shake of the head she reminded him that she had not a farthing. The usual tone of their conversation warranted a little levity on her part at this juncture. Behold ! he knew it, and cared not. If his own income seemed paltry (alas ! it was), would she not wait and let him seek a position ? In brief, could she not love him a little, and try to love him more ? for indeed his love for her was——

Foolish Robert Asquith ! Love cometh not by endeavour ; and, as for Isabel, how could she wait ? Had it so pleased the Fates that she *could* have loved him, had there but fallen upon these maiden years a spark of that heaven's fire, so that calculation of income and other degradations might all at once have become as naught, to what heights of glorified womanhood might not this soul have risen, and what blessedness like unto his who should have held her in his sovereign hands ?

Robert saw her no more. He was in London still at the date of her marriage, but shortly after that he had obtained a Government appointment in Turkey, and the ship bore him to Eastern lands. He was then three-and-twenty. Five years later news of her widow-

hood reached him in Constantinople, and he exchanged with her one or two cousinly letters. There was an interval, and correspondence renewed itself, this time begun by Isabel. But Robert began to travel ; he wrote from India, Japan, California ; then he was back in Constantinople. His father died, and Robert was wealthy ; he came to England for a month, spent an hour with his cousin, returned to Turkey, still holding a Government appointment. Now at length he had returned to England for good, and was looking about for a settlement. He was forty.

So Isabel married Mr. Eustace Clarendon, M.P. At nine-and-forty he was held to be a handsome man, though in all probability he had been an ugly one twenty years before. His good looks consisted, if in anything, in a clean precision of nose and jaw, allying itself with the gray clearness of a cold eye and the display of a very satisfactory set of teeth. His hair was very scant, but he just escaped the charge of baldness ; he had thin whiskers, high up on each cheek. His manners were a trifle frigid, and his eyes wandered absently as he talked with you, but it was said that he could make himself excessively agreeable when he pleased. Probably he did so to Isabel. He was much addicted to politics, and had all his life

nourished political ambition ; his failure to reach anything was perhaps responsible for a certain sourness of visage, a certain cynicism of tone, at times. Still, he impressed the ordinary observer as a man of parts ; he had a way of uttering sententious truisms which imposed upon the average listener, and drew fine distinctions between Liberalism (which he represented) and Radicalism (which he shuddered at), calculated to make one reflect—on politics. He lived much at clubs, and, though he had purchased the fine estate of Knightswell, cared nothing for country pursuits.

They were married, and lived together for five years. Outwardly there was nothing whatever to suggest that they were not as happy as married people ordinarily are. They had no children, and Mr. Clarendon was said to be vexed at this, but such little vexations a wise man philosophically endures. And Mr. Clarendon laid claim to a certain kind of philosophy. In these latter years of his life his cynicisms of speech became rather more pronounced, but they were of a kind which with most people earned him credit for superiority. One favourite phrase he had which came to his lips whenever he happened to be talking of his worldly affairs ; it was : “*Après moi le déluge.*” He seemed to mean something special by this.

Isabel grew to hate the sound of those words, as if they had been a formula of diabolical incantation.

At first she had life all her own way. They went on to the Continent, where her young mind grew, then came back to spend the winter at Knightswell. The house was kept incessantly full of guests, and Isabel shone. Mr. Clarendon never rode to hounds, but for his wife's sake hunters were bought, and Isabel proved herself the most splendid horsewoman in the field ; that bareback riding at her uncle's farm had been of service to her. She entered into the joy of hunting with almost reckless abandonment ; she risked leaps which made men stare, and was in at the death with a face and figure which took away one's breath. Mr. Clarendon stayed at home these days, and was in the doorway to receive her when she returned. They were not seen to greet each other.

Then Mr. Clarendon fell ill of the disease which was to kill him. It was horribly painful, necessitating hideous operations, renewed again and again ; an illness lasting for three years. He went to London, and Isabel began her work of tending him. To move about his bedroom, with that clear, cold, gray eye of his following her wherever she went, was a ghastly

trial, but she bore it. Society was renounced ; only occasionally she went to see intimate friends. One day her maid, a woman who loved her, begged leave to tell her something—something of which she was not sure that she ought to speak.

“Whenever you leave the house, ma’am,” she said, “a man follows you—follows you everywhere, and back home again.”

“Why, what man ?”

“A man, ma’am, who—who has been to see master several times,” said the servant, with apprehension.

“You mean—a paid man ? A man employed for this ?”

It was enough. Isabel went out no more. A friend or two came to see her, but at length she was deserted. Her mother died, and she could not even attend the funeral. Then Mr. Clarendon was removed to Knightswell, where she tended him for yet another year. At length he died after an agony of twelve hours. His last words were : “Après moi le déluge.”

It was said that he had left an extraordinary will ; those who cared to do so discovered the details, and talked them over with much enjoyment of the sensation. Outwardly, Isabel’s life soon returned to its former joyousness. In the season in London (though not in the former

house ; she took rooms each year for three months), the rest of the year at Knightswell, she pursued her social triumphs ; people held that she was more charming than ever. One curious change there was in her circumstances. Immediately after her husband's death she took to live with her a little girl of seven, a very plain and unattractive child, whose name was Ada Warren. She seemed to have made of her an adoptive daughter. Those who knew Mr. Clarendon's will understood the child's presence in the house. Mrs. Clarendon never directly spoke of her.

And so twelve years of widowhood went by, and time brought the Midsummer Day which found Bernard Kingcote rambling between Salcot East and Winstoke. Mrs. Clarendon's age was now thirty-six.

CHAPTER III.

ONE morning in August Mrs. Clarendon was sitting in the garden at Knightswell, with Ada Warren and a young lady named Rhoda Meres, a guest at the house. They had chosen a spot which was often resorted to for tea on hot afternoons, a little piece of lawn closely shut in with leafage, whence an overbowered pathway led out to the front garden. The lady of Knightswell sat reposefully in a round-backed rustic chair. She wore a pretty garden costume, a dainty web of shawl just covering her head, her crossed feet just showing below the folds of her dress. An open sunshade lay tumbled on the grass beside her, and on her lap was an illustrated paper, of which she turned the leaves with idle interest. Miss Warren sat a couple of yards away, reading a review. Her dress was plain, and of dark material, and she wore a brown broad-brimmed straw hat. The other young lady made no pretence of being occu-

pied. With knit brows and bent head she walked backwards and forwards on the grass, biting a long leaf which she had pulled from a bough in passing. She was a pretty girl, fair-cheeked and graceful of form. She carried her hat by its ribbon, and let the stray sunlight make gleamings upon her golden hair. Her age was not quite nineteen, and the beautiful lines of her maiden figure lost nothing by her way of holding herself, whether she moved or stood.

After several side glances at her silent companions, she presently came to a pause before Mrs. Clarendon's chair, and, still holding the leaf between her lips, asked, rather plaintively :

“ Why shouldn't I, Mrs. Clarendon ? ”

Isabel looked up with suave smiling features, and met the girl's eyes in silence for a moment.

“ My dear Rhoda,” she said then, “ why should you ? ”

“ No,” urged the girl, “ I think all the reasons are needed on the other side. I must do something, and this is what I think I'm suited for. Why shouldn't I ? ”

“ For one thing, because you are a lady, and ladies don't do such things.”

“ There you have Mrs. Clarendon's last word,” remarked Ada Warren, without looking

up. Her voice contrasted strangely with those which had been just heard ; it was hard in tone, giving clear utterance to each syllable, as if to accentuate the irony in her observation.

"Certainly," said Isabel, with good humour; "if Rhoda is content to let it be."

Still biting her leaf, Miss Meres held her head a little on one side, and, after glancing at Ada, turned her eyes again upon Mrs. Clarendon.

"But are you quite sure it is so, Mrs. Clarendon ?" she urged. "I mean that ladies don't go on to the stage ? It used to be so, no doubt, but things have been changing. I'm sure I've heard that both ladies and gentlemen are beginning to take to acting nowadays. And I can't see why they shouldn't. It seems to be better than—"

She stopped, and looked a little embarrassed.

"Better than doing nothing at all, you were going to say," Isabel supplied ; "like myself, for instance ? Perhaps it is. But I fancy that the ladies who go on to the stage are generally those who, for some reason or other, have lost their places in society."

"With a large S," put in Ada, still without looking up.

"Yes, a very large one," assented Isabel, smiling.

"And suppose," exclaimed Rhoda, suddenly bold, "I don't care anything about the society which spells itself with a large S."

Mrs. Clarendon shook her head indulgently.

"My child, you can't help caring about it."

"Not if I find something I like better outside it?"

Mrs. Clarendon crossed her hands upon the paper, and sighed a little before speaking.

"You think it would be nice to become a Bohemian, and live in contempt of us poor subjects of Mrs. Grundy. Rhoda, those Bohemians struggle for nothing so hard as to get into society. If they are successful, the best fruit of their success is an invitation to a lady's 'at home,' the unsuccessful ones would give their ears to be received in the most commonplace little drawing-room. Now you have already what they strive for so desperately. You'll see all this plainly enough when you know a little more of the world."

Rhoda turned away, and recommenced her pacing.

"What does your father say to it?" Mrs. Clarendon asked, after a short silence.

"Father? Oh! he shrugs his shoulders and looks puzzled. Poor father always does that, whatever the difficulty. If I ask him whether

the butcher hasn't charged us too much a pound for veal, he shrugs and looks puzzled. I believe he'd do just the same if I asked him whether to-morrow wasn't going to be the Day of Judgment."

Isabel raised her forefinger with a warning smile. Ada Warren laughed.

After another turn on the grass, the girl again paused before Mrs. Clarendon.

"Mr. Lacour told me the other day that he thought of going on to the stage himself. He didn't see any harm in it."

As she spoke, Rhoda examined the border of her hat.

"Mr. Lacour!" exclaimed Isabel. "Oh, Mr. Lacour says wonderful things, and has wonderful plans. So you confided your project to Mr. Lacour, did you?"

Isabel threw a rapid glance at Ada whilst speaking; the latter appeared busy with her book.

"No, no," disclaimed Rhoda rapidly, "I didn't say a word to him of my own idea. It only came out in conversation."

Mrs. Clarendon gave a little "h'm," and stroked the back of one hand with the fingers of the other.

"It's a mistake, my dear Rhoda," she said. "Like it or not, we have to consider our neigh-

bour's opinion, and that doesn't yet regard the stage as a career open to gentlemen's daughters."

"There's no knowing what we *may* come to," remarked Ada absently.

"Then what *am* I to do, Mrs. Clarendon?" cried the other girl almost piteously.

"A great many things. To begin with, you have to help me to make my garden party on Monday a success. Then again—oh, you have to become acquainted with my cousin, Mr. Asquith. Here he is!"

From the covered pathway issued a tall gentleman of middle age, dressed in a cool summer suit, holding his hat in his hands. His appearance was what is called prepossessing; by his own complete ease and air of genial well-being he helped to put others in the same happy state, his self-satisfaction not being of the kind which irritates by excess. His head was covered with a fine growth of black hair, which continued itself in the form of full whiskers, and with these blended the silken grace of a moustache long enough to completely conceal the lips. His features were slightly browned by Eastern suns. His eyes, as he viewed in turn each of the three ladies, had a calm, restful gaze which could have embarrassed no one, hinting only the friendliest of inward comment.

Isabel rose and stepped forward to meet him. In the act of greeting she was, perhaps, seen to greatest advantage. The upright grace of her still perfect figure, the poise of her head, the face looking straight forward, the smile of exquisite frankness, the warmth of welcome and the natural dignity combined in her attitude as she stood with extended hand, made a picture of fair womanhood which the eye did not readily quit. It was symbolical of her inner self, of the large affections which made the air about her warm, and of the sweet receptiveness of disposition which allowed so many and so different men to see in her their ideal of a woman.

"You found the trap at the station?" she asked, and, satisfied on this point, presented him to her companions. Though Asquith had just reached England in time to see his cousin once or twice before she left London, he had still to become acquainted with Ada Warren, who did not go to town with Mrs. Clarendon, but preferred to make her visits at other times, staying with Mr. Meres and his daughters. Ada was silent during the ceremony of introduction, and did not give her hand; Rhoda showed her more expansive nature and smiled prettily in Robert's face.

"I thought you would find it pleasant to

come and sit here a little before lunch," said Isabel, by way of leading to conversation.

But Asquith merely bent his head; he seemed all at once to have become a trifle absent, and, after letting his gaze rest on Miss Warren for a few moments, had turned his look groundwards. But the interval was very short.

"That groom of yours who drove me over," he began, in a leisurely tone and with an appreciative smile, "is a wonderful man."

"That's interesting," said Isabel. "I fear I haven't discovered his exceptional qualities."

"They are remarkable. His powers of observation. I make a point of conversing whenever opportunity offers. The suggestive incident was a pig crossing the road; I remarked that it was a fine pig. By a singular accident I must have hit upon the man's specialty; he looked at me with gratitude, and forthwith gave me—you can't imagine—the most wonderful disquisition on pigs. He spoke as if he loved them. 'Now, a pig's heye, sir! Did you ever happen to notice a pig's heye, sir?' I was afraid to say that I had. 'There's more in a pig's heye, sir, than you'd find creditable,'—meaning credible, of course. 'There's that knowingness in a pig's heye, sir, it can't be described in words. *When* it isn't

fierce,—and if it *is*, the fierceness of it there's no imagining!"

This narration, given with much quiet humour, made Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda laugh. Ada Warren had resumed her review, or at all events had it lying open on her lap, and showed no smile. Robert watched her with his quiet eyes. In Miss Meres he seemed to have little interest, and he looked far more frequently at Ada than at Mrs. Clarendon.

"By-the-bye, some one we passed on the road," he said presently. He had a curious habit of mentioning in this disjointed way the subject of the remark he was about to make, and, so reposedful was his habit of speech, it often seemed as if the comment would never follow. "A young man, rather good-looking, or perhaps, rather noticeable. My friend the groom told me he was a settler in these parts; a gentleman who has taken a labourer's cottage, and lives in a more or less eccentric way. It sounded interesting. Do you know anything of him?"

"Oh yes," said Isabel, "our rector, Mr. Vissian, knows him, and speaks of him in superlatives. His name is Kingcote."

"But what is he doing here?—reading, rusticating? I suppose he's taken the cottage just for the summer months?"

"Mr. Vessian says he has settled here for good—a philosopher, who is tired of town life. He comes from London. I haven't been favoured with a glimpse of him yet, but several people have spoken of him. I think I must ask Mr. Vessian to bring him here."

"A month or so of summer would be pleasant, spent in that way," observed Mr. Asquith ; "but to settle finally ! Something morbid about him, I suppose ; he looks, in fact, rather bloodless, like a man with a fixed idea. Ten to one, he's on precisely the wrong tack ; instead of wanting more of his own society, he ought to have less of it. I suppose he lives alone ?"

"Quite."

"The worst thing for any man. I shouldn't dare to converse with myself exclusively for two consecutive days. The great preservative of sanity is free intercourse with one's fellow men—to see the world from all points, and to refrain from final conclusions."

Chat of this kind went on for a few minutes, all taking part in it except Ada.

"You are fond of the country, Miss Warren," Asquith said at length, addressing the latter directly.

"Yes, I'm fond of the country," was the reply, given in a mechanical way, and with a cold, steady look, whilst she ruffled the edges

of her review. Asquith had found it at first difficult to determine whether the peculiarity of the girl's behaviour were due to excessive shyness or to some more specific cause ; but shyness it certainly was not, her manner of speaking and of regarding him put that out of the question. Did she, then, behave in this way to every stranger, or was he for some reason personally distasteful to her ; or, again, had something just happened to disturb her temper ?

"Your liking for it, though, would scarcely go to the extent of leading you to take up a solitary abode in a labourer's cottage ?"

"I can't say," Ada replied slowly. "One is often ready to do anything for the sake of being left alone."

"Ada would stipulate, however, to be supplied with the *Fortnightly* or the *Nineteenth Century*," put in Mrs. Clarendon laughingly.

"If anything could drive me into the desert," was Robert's remark, "it would be the hope of never again being called upon to look at them. I shouldn't wonder if Mr.—Mr. Kingcote, isn't it ?—has fled from civilisation for the very same reason. Probably he has cast away books, and aims at returning to the natural state of man."

"By no means," said Isabel. "He has brought down quite a library."

“Alas!” exclaimed Robert, with a humorous shaking of the head, “then he is, I fear, engaged in adding to the burden which oppresses us. No wonder he hides his head; he is writing a book.”

“Perhaps he is a poet, Mrs. Clarendon,” puts in Rhoda.

“Perhaps so, Rhoda; and some day we may have pilgrims from all corners of the earth visiting the cottage he has glorified.”

“With special omnibuses from Winstoke station,” added Robert, “and a colony of licensed victuallers thriving about the sacred spot.”

“Let us be thankful,” exclaimed Isabel, “that a poet’s fame is usually deferred for a generation or two. Ha, there’s the first luncheon bell! It brings a smile to your face, Robert.”

“Did I betray myself? I confess I break-fasted early.”

The two girls walked towards the house together, their elders following more slowly.

“Isn’t Rhoda Meres a nice girl?” said Isabel, when the object of her remark was out of hearing.

“Very,” her cousin assented, though without enthusiasm. He seemed to be thinking of something else.

"The poor child has got a foolish idea into her head ; she wants to go on to the stage."

"Does she—ha ? Most young people have that idea at one time or another, I believe. In default of a special audience of one, you see——"

"And she *is* such a good, dear girl !" pursued Isabel, when Asquith showed no sign of continuing. "Her father is a literary man, the editor of a magazine called *Roper's Miscellany*—do you know it ? He and I are the best of old friends. It's only with the thought of helping her father, I'm sure, that Rhoda has taken up this fancy ; we must drive it out of her head somehow."

"Yes, I suppose so," remarked Robert, more absently than before.

Isabel glanced at him, and kept silence till they reached the house.

There was nothing remarkable about the structure itself of Knightswell ; the front was long and low, built of brick faced with stone, and the level entrance was anything but imposing. The main portion of the building was early eighteenth century, but in the rear there still existed a remnant of the sixteenth century manor-house which had once stood here ; the ancient hall now served as kitchen, its fine stone fireplace being filled up with an incongruous modern range. The present hall was

surrounded with oak panelling, which Mr. Clarendon had obtained at the dismantling of an old house in the neighbourhood ; all else of the interior had become, by successive changes, completely modernised, with the exception of an elaborate chimney-piece in the drawing-room—massive marble-work resting on caryatides—always said, though without corroborative evidence, to be a production of Grinling Gibbons. The faces of the two supporters were curiously unlike each other : on the one side it was that of a youthful maiden, who smiled, and seemed to be upraising her arms in sport ; the other was an aged but not unbeautiful face, wearing an expression of long-suffering sadness, worn under the burden which the striving arms sustained. In the dining-room were a few good pictures, taken with the house from the preceding occupants. For Knightswell was not the ancestral abode of Mr. Clarendon's family ; it had passed, by frequent changes, from tenant to tenant, all inglorious. Notwithstanding his historic name, Mr. Clarendon was a *novus homo* ; his father had begun life as an obscure stockbroker, had made a great fortune, and ended his life in a comfortable dwelling in Bayswater ; his daughters, there were two, married reputably, and were no more heard of.

During luncheon Asquith was still much occupied in observing Ada Warren whenever he could unobtrusively do so. The young ladies were rather silent, and even Isabel showed now and then a trace of effort in the bright flow of talk which she kept up. Between herself and her cousin, however, there was no lack of ease ; a graceful intimacy had established itself on the basis of their kinship, though not exactly that kind of intimacy which bespeaks life-long association. Their talk was of the present, or of the immediate past ; neither spoke of things or people whose mention would have revived the memory of years ago.

"And what are you doing with yourself ?" Mrs. Clarendon inquired, when Robert had abandoned another futile attempt to draw Ada Warren into converse.

"Upon my word," was his reply, "I hardly know. The town ; I see a good deal of it, indoors and out ; it still has the charm of novelty. I can't say that time has begun to hang heavy on my hands ; in truth, it seldom does."

"Fortunate being!"

"Yes, I suppose so. I find that people have a singular capacity for being bored ; I notice it more than I used to. For my own part, I generally find a good deal of enjoyment to be got out of the present moment ; the en-

joyment of sound health, at lowest. You know how pleasant it is to look back on past days, even though at the time they may have seemed anything but delightful. I account for that by believing that the past always had a preponderant element of pleasure, though disturbing circumstances wouldn't allow us to perceive it. It's always a joy to be alive, and we recognise this in looking back, when accidents arrange themselves in their true proportion."

He glanced at Ada ; the girl was smiling scornfully, her face averted to the window.

"The present being so delightful," said Mrs. Clarendon, "what joyous pleasures have you for the immediate future ?"

"Grouse on Wednesday next," Robert replied, after helping himself to salt in a manner which suggested that he was observant of the number of grains he took. "An acquaintance who has a moor, or a portion of one, in Yorkshire, has given me an invitation. As I have never shot grouse, I shall avail myself of the opportunity to extend my experience."

"Promise me the pick of your first bag."

There was a project for a long drive in the afternoon ; the weather was bright but sufficiently cool, and Robert professed himself delighted. He had a few minutes by himself in the drawing-room when the ladies went up to

make their preparations. He gave a careful scrutiny to the caryatides, smiling, as was generally the case when he regarded anything, then glanced about at the pictures and the chance volumes lying here and there; the latter were novels and light literature from Mudie's. Then he took up a number of the *Queen*, and began to peruse it, sitting in the window-seat.

"What a singular choice of literature!" exclaimed Isabel, as she came in drawing on her gloves.

"The *Queen*? It interests me. There's something so very concrete about such writing. I like the concrete."

"The first time I ever heard so learned a term applied to so frivolous a publication. After all, Rhoda, there may be more in us poor creatures than we gave ourselves credit for."

"Do tell me," said Robert, as he laid down the paper, "what is a—I hope I may ask—what is a 'graduated plastron'?"

"Oh, this is dreadful!" laughed Isabel. "Come along, the carriage is waiting; we'll discuss graduated plastrons on our way."

"Are we not to have the pleasure of Miss Warren's company?" Robert asked, as they entered the phaeton.

"Ada never goes out with us," was Mrs.

Clarendon's answer as she took the reins and prepared to drive.

There was no additional guest at dinner ; the evening was helped along by Rhoda's playing and singing. Her voice was good, and she had enjoyed good teaching ; this at Mrs. Clarendon's expense. It was one of many instances in which Isabel had helped her friends the Meres, her aid being given in a manner of which she alone had the secret—irresistible, warm-hearted, delicate beyond risk of offence. Ada sat in the room, but, as usual, had a book in her hands.

" You read much," said Robert, seating himself beside her and perforce obtaining her attention.

" It is a way of getting through life," the girl replied, rather less abruptly than she had hitherto spoken.

" That means that life is not quite so attractive to you as it might be ? " he returned, under the cover of the music which had just begun.

" I doubt whether life is attractive to any one—who thinks about it."

She had folded her hands on the pages and was leaning back in her chair. Robert examined her and came to the conclusion that she was not quite so disagreeable in countenance as the irregularity of her features at first

led one to think. She had large eyes, and, to meet them, was to be strangely impressed, almost as with the attraction of beauty. Her evening dress was of black satin, a richer and more tasteful garment than he had expected she would wear, judging from her appearance earlier in the day. Her hair, too, was very carefully arranged. The foot, which just showed itself, was not small, but beautifully shaped. Ornaments she had none.

"That is censure clearly directed against myself," Robert said, with good humour. "And yet I fancy I have thought a good deal of life."

Ada did not seem disposed to pursue the argument.

"What are you reading?" Asquith inquired.

It was a volume of Comte. She showed the title without speaking.

"You are a Positivist?"

"No; merely an atheist."

The confession was uttered in such a matter-of-fact tone that Robert was disposed to think she used the word just for the pleasure of startling him. There was, in fact, a barely perceptible glimmer in her eyes as she sat looking straight before her.

"That's rather dogmatic, isn't it?" he remarked, smiling. "The word Agnostic is better, I fancy."

"I believe it comes to very much the same thing," said Ada. "The new word has been coined principally to save respectability."

"A motive with which you have small sympathy?"

"None whatever."

There was a silence between them.

"You play?" Robert asked, Rhoda Meres having risen from the piano.

"Only for my own amusement."

"Then certainly you play things which I should like to hear. Will you play me something that has a tune in it? I don't mean to reflect upon Miss Meres' playing; but my ear is in a rudimentary state. I should be very grateful if you would play something."

Ada seemed to harden her face against an intruding smile. She rose, however, and walked over to the piano. Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda looked at her with undisguised surprise. Asquith noticed that her walk might have been graceful, had she not affected a sort of indifference in gait.

She seated herself at the instrument and played an operatic air; it lasted about three minutes, then she ceased. Robert looked in expectation of her resuming her former seat, but she walked straight to the door and disappeared.

Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda Meres exchanged glances, and for an instant there was a rather awkward silence. Isabel found a subject, and talked with her wonted vivacity.

Ada did not return. About half-past ten Rhoda began to make preparations for departure ; she went to one of the windows, and held the blind aside a little to look out at the night.

"Oh ! what a moon !" she exclaimed. "Mrs. Clarendon, do let us just go out for a minute on to the lawn ; the country is so wonderful at night."

Wrappers were at hand for the ladies, and the three went out together. The whole scope of visible heavens was pale with light ; the blacker rose the circle of trees about Knights-well. The leaves made their weird whispering, each kind with its separate voice ; no other sounds came from the sleeping earth.

"We often hear the nightingale," Isabel said, lowering her voice. "Perhaps it's too early yet."

Then she added :

"This is the hour of our poet's inspiration."

"What poet ?" asked Robert.

"Our poet in the cottage ; don't you remember ?"

"Ah, the morbid young man. Poor fellow!"

Isabel suppressed a low laugh.

"Come, Rhoda dear, it's cold," she said to the girl, who had drawn a little apart.

Rhoda followed in silence, her head bent. In the hall she took her candle, and bade the two a hasty good-night.

"Why is she crying?" asked Robert, under his voice, as he entered the drawing-room again with Isabel.

The latter shook her head, but did not speak. She moved about the room for a moment; the shawl had half slipped from her shoulders, and made a graceful draping. Asquith stood watching her.

She approached him.

"I half hinted," she began, "that I had a selfish object in asking you to come here. We are good friends, are we not?—old and good friends?"

There was a beautiful appeal upon her face, anxiety blending with a slight embarrassment. She had put aside the mask of light-heartedness, and that which it had all day been in her countenance to utter freely exposed itself. It was not so much as distress; rather, impatience of some besieging annoyance. She was more beautiful now than when Robert had read her

face seventeen years ago. Still, he regarded her with his wonted smile. There was much kindness in his look; nothing more than kindness.

"The best of friends, Isabel, I hope," he replied to her.

"I am going to ask you to do something for me," she continued. "Will you sit down and listen to me? I am not sure that I do right in asking this favour of you, but you are the only one of my relatives whom I feel able to talk freely with, and I think I had rather you than any one else did this thing that I am going to ask. Perhaps you will find it too disagreeable; if so, tell me—you will promise to speak freely?"

"Certainly, I promise."

They had taken their seats. Asquith rested one of his arms on a small table, and waited, the smile lingering. Isabel gathered the shawl about her, as if she felt cold. She was a trifle pale.

"You understand perfectly," she resumed, with a certain abruptness, which came of the effort it cost her to broach the subject, "the meaning of Ada Warren's presence in this house?"

"Perfectly, I think," her cousin replied, with a slight motion of his eyebrows.

"That is to say," pursued Isabel, looking at the fringe of her shawl, "you know the details of Mr. Clarendon's will?"

He paused an instant before replying.

"Precisely," was his word, as he tapped the table.

Isabel smiled, a smile different from that with which she was wont to charm. It was one almost of self-contempt, and full of bitter memories.

"I had never heard of her," she continued, "until I was called upon to take her as my own child. Then she was sent to me from people who had had the care of her since she was three years old."

Asquith slowly nodded, wrinkling his forehead.

"Well, we will speak no more of that. What I wish to ask you to do for me is this:—Oh, I am ashamed to speak of it! It is something that I ought to have done myself already. But I am a coward; I have always been a coward. I can't face the consequences of my own—my own baseness; that is the true word. Will you tell Ada Warren what her real position is, and what mine?"

Asquith raised his head in astonishment.

"She is still ignorant?"

"I have every reason to believe so. I don't think any one will have told her."

Robert bit his upper lip.

"Has she never asked questions about her origin?"

"Yes, but only once. I told her that her parents were friends of Mr. Clarendon, and that she was an orphan, therefore I had taken her. That was several years ago."

Again there was a pause in the dialogue. Isabel had difficulty in keeping her face raised; her cheeks had lost their pallor, the blood every now and then made them warm.

"She seems a strange being," Asquith remarked. "I am not as a rule tempted to puzzle about people's characteristics, but hers provoke one's curiosity."

"I cannot aid you," Isabel said, speaking quickly. "I know her as little as on the day when I first saw her. I have tried to be kind; I have tried to——"

She broke off. Her voice had begun to express emotion, and the sound seemed to recall her to self-command. She looked up, smiling more naturally, though still with a touch of shame.

"Will you help me, cousin?" she asked.

"Certainly I will do what you wish. Do

you desire me to explain everything in detail——”

“The will, the will,” she interposed, with a motion of her hand. “Yes, the full details of the will.”

“And if she asks me——?”

“You know nothing—that is best. You cannot speak to her on such a subject. Will you wait for me a moment?”

She rose hastily and left the room. Asquith remained standing till her return. She was only a few moments absent, and came back with a folded paper in her hand.

“This,” she said, “is a full copy of the will. It might be best to read it to her, or even to let her have it to read herself. She may keep it if she wishes to.”

Asquith took the paper and stood in thought.

“You have well considered this?” he asked.

“Oh, for long enough. I thank you for your great kindness.”

“When shall I see her? To-morrow is Sunday. Does she go to church?”

“Never.”

“Then I will take the opportunity, whilst you and Miss Meres are away.”

Isabel gave him her hand, and they exchanged good-nights.

CHAPTER IV.

ROBERT ASQUITH was in the garden before breakfast next morning, with untroubled countenance, scrutinising objects in detail, now and then suppressing a tendency to give forth a note or two of song. He walked with his hands in his pockets, not removing them when he stooped to examine the gardener's inscription stuck by the root of a flower or shrub. He had no special interest in these matters, but the bent of his mind was to observation ; he avoided as much as possible mere ruminativeness. The course of his wandering brought him round to the stables ; the sight of their admirable order and of the beasts in the stalls —the carriage-horse, the two beautiful ponies that Mrs. Clarendon drove, and the five-year-old chestnut which at present she rode—gave him an Englishman's satisfaction. Isabel was as active and practical in the superintendence of her stables as in every other pursuit which she

regarded as duty or pleasure ; the most exacting squire could not have had things in better condition. Here Robert came in contact with his acquaintance, the groom, and received from him much information about the animals, also concerning their predecessors in the stables. Strolling back to the front lawn, accompanied by the house-dog, he met Ada Warren. She wore her ordinary brown straw hat, and seemed to be coming from the park. The dog began to leap about her, barking joyously.

She spoke a quiet good-morning, but did not offer to shake hands. Robert talked a little about the fine weather and the pleasure of breathing morning air ; he elicited in reply a series of assents. Ada had taken one of the dog's silky ears in her hand, and the animal suffered himself very patiently to be led thus.

“Do you remain at home this morning, Miss Warren ?” Robert inquired, as they approached the house.

“Yes.”

“In that case, may I ask if you will favour me with half-an-hour’s conversation some time after breakfast ?”

She looked round with frank surprise, only turning away her gaze when she had assured herself of his seriousness.

"I shall be in the library till one o'clock," she said.

"Thank you; I will come there."

Watching her at breakfast, Robert thought he perceived some traces of curiosity and anticipation in the girl's face; once, too, he caught her eyes straying in his direction. "Come," he said to himself, "there is something human in her after all. We shall see if we can't make the exhibition yet more pronounced."

As soon as Mrs. Clarendon and Rhoda Meres were gone to church, Asquith made his way to the library, carrying the document which Isabel had entrusted to him the night before. The room remained very much as it had been in Mr. Clarendon's days. When gentlemen were at Knightswell, it was used as a retreat for smoking; Isabel herself scarcely ever entered, but Ada Warren used it regularly. There were on the shelves not more than four hundred volumes, and half of these were calf-bound legal literature and blue-books, representing periods of Mr. Clarendon's career. On the table lay volumes of a different kind, many of them showing Mudie's tickets; they were works of human interest of the day, food—or at least refreshment—for an active and independent mind; French and German books were here too. Asquith glanced at the names on one or

two of the yellow backs in passing, and suppressed a smile. But he thought all the better of the girl for her intellectual enterprise.

Ada sat with her back to the window, reading; at his entrance she closed her book, but did not move. He placed a chair at a little distance from her, and leaned forward, as if about to talk in a familiar manner.

"I surprised you by my request?" he began, with a smile. "It was rather formal, and necessarily so, for it is strictly a matter of business that I wish to speak of."

Ada's position had not allowed him to get a clear view of her face at first. Raising his eyes after this introduction, he was startled by what he saw. The girl was the hue of death; all the natural tint had left her cheeks, and her lips were unnaturally pale. She was pressing one hand against her left side, and her eyes showed that she was suffering from scarcely controllable agitation. He was in doubt whether to take notice of it or not, when she suddenly rose from the chair.

"You are unwell, Miss Warren——?"

She turned sharply away, and walked the length of the room.

"Shall I postpone—this business?" said Robert, remarkably interested in observing her.

"Thank you, no," was her reply, as she seated herself further from him than before. "I shall be obliged to you if you will speak plainly and directly, whatever the business is. I have a headache; a long conversation will be disagreeable to me."

"I will speak as directly as possible. At Mrs. Clarendon's request I have undertaken to make known to you certain facts regarding your —your future, of which, I understand, it has not been deemed necessary to speak hitherto. I have, in short, to tell you what were the provisions of the late Mr. Clarendon's will; they concern you nearly."

Ada's aspect was calm, but he saw that her bosom rose and fell in a way which showed an inward struggle. She gave no sign of a wish to speak.

"I have here a copy of the will," he continued, unrolling the paper. "It is long, and of course full of technicalities. Perhaps I shall do best to put the gist of it into a few plain words. To begin then, Mr. Clarendon made you heiress of all but the whole of his real and personal estate, with possession upon your attainment of your majority, or, should you marry before that age, then at your marriage. Under the will two trustees are appointed, gentlemen who were Mr. Clarendon's friends—

I need not mention their names. Until either of the events which should give you possession, Mrs. Clarendon had the use of Knightswell, with all it contained, and an income from the estate of two thousand pounds a year; this, however, only on condition that she took you into her house and brought you up in every way as her own child, with care for your education such as the trustees should approve. If Mrs. Clarendon declined to accept this condition, or if she married again prior to your entering into possession, her benefit by the will was limited to an annuity of three hundred pounds."

Robert paused. His tone was as matter-of-fact as if he were demonstrating a proposition of Euclid, but a smile had at length risen to his face. It came of his observation of the listener. Ada had closed her eyes; her hands were nervously clasped upon her lap.

"You follow this, Miss Warren?"

She raised her lids and regarded him. Her bosom had ceased to heave; she seemed to have regained her ordinary state of mind.

"I follow it," she said.

"Should you die, unmarried, before the end of your twenty-first year," Asquith pursued, "the whole of the estate goes to certain very

remote connections of Mr. Clarendon.—No other contingency is provided for."

"No other contingency is provided for," repeated the girl mechanically. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean——"

Robert interrupted himself, and resumed in an off-hand way :

"Oh, other possible cases which will occur to one thinking the matter over."

Ada appeared to reflect. Her face was turned slightly upwards, and a restful expression had come upon it.

"Is it," she asked at length, "within your province to tell me any more than this?"

"I think," Robert replied, "that I have nothing more to tell. If you wish it, I will leave this copy with you; I understood Mrs. Clarendon to say that you might keep it."

"Thank you, I will do so."

She rose and took it from his hand.

"There is one thing," she said, "that I should like to ask you; I dare say you will have no objection to answer. Are the provisions of this will generally known—to Mrs. Clarendon's friends, I would say?"

"In all probability they are," was his reply.

"Thank you."

Clearly there was nothing more to be said on either side. Any comment from Asquith was of course out of the question, and Ada, at all times so chary of her conversation, was not likely to give utterance to her feelings under the present circumstances. She moved away, slightly returned the other's bow, and went from the room.

At luncheon Ada did not appear. It was not an uncommon thing for her to take meals by herself; but Mrs. Clarendon and Robert felt that her absence to-day had a significance. She was at dinner, however, and behaved as usual. Nothing in her betrayed a change in her state of mind.

Whilst Rhoda was reading in the garden in the afternoon, Mrs. Clarendon strayed apart with her cousin.

"You have told her?" she said, meeting Robert's look.

"Yes, and left the copy of the will with her. It seems to have made her oblivious of lunch."

"Poor girl!"

The exclamation was a sincere one. Robert looked surprised.

"Did she ask you many questions?" Isabel continued.

"Two: whether I had anything more to tell

her; and whether I thought that the will was generally known? To the former I said 'No'; to the latter 'Yes.'"

"Whether it was generally known," repeated Isabel, with a low laugh of a not very mirthful kind. Then, after a pause, "What do people say of me? What is the common talk about me? What do the men say? and—oh! the women?"

"My dear cousin, you know perfectly well what they say; what they have been saying since they first began to talk about you—that you are a charming woman, and so good-hearted that no one can for shame breathe a word against you."

Isabel sighed.

"Rather, so shameless that gossip has not yet found the proper term to characterise me. Well, never mind myself; happily I shall soon cease to be an object of any general interest. But did she not ask any question about the value of the property?"

"No word of it. She kept me strictly at arm's length."

"And she displayed no—no emotion?"

"At first, yes; she was extremely agitated. But she held it down. I imagine she is what is called a woman of character. I had rather not be her husband."

Isabel made no reply, but walked on with her head bent.

"Will you let me ask you," Robert began, "had you any particular reason for wishing to inform her of these matters just now?"

"Yes, I had. There is no reason why I shouldn't tell you. There is a certain Mr. Lacour—you'll meet him here to-morrow afternoon—a young man whom I have known for some time as a friend of the Bruce Pages; their place is at Hanford, five miles off. He's a brother of Sir Miles Lacour. Well, Mr. Vincent Lacour has called on me often in town, and a week ago he lunched with us here; he's staying at the Bruce Pages' again. I rather like him, and I believe there's not a bit of harm in him really; but he seems to have been terribly wild, and he's quarrelled with his brother, the baronet. I don't suppose he's anything left to live on, and Sir Miles refuses to help him any more. We learn all this from young Lacour himself; he's remarkably frank, embarrassingly so at times. Now I half fancy he's made an impression on Ada; certainly I never knew her talk so freely with any one, or show such healthy signs of interest. It wouldn't be surprising; he's a charming young fellow, decidedly handsome, and the strangest talker. I fancied Ada looked pleased when I mentioned

that he was coming to the garden party tomorrow. I don't know whether he ought to be put in the girl's way, but I had to ask the Bruce Pages, and I couldn't leave him out very well. Now you see my reason. I have never before been obliged to think of such a thing. It would be unjust to Ada to leave her in the dark as to her true position."

"This Mr. Lacour is doubtless aware of the circumstances?"

"Without a doubt."

"And you think he might——"

"It is not impossible. He must be in desperate straits."

"How old is the individual?"

"About three-and-twenty, I think. He had ten thousand pounds of his own when he came of age."

"Wherewith he has purchased experience. He must be rich in that article."

"I'm afraid he is; but I confess I like him. I don't think he would be a bad husband. I believe his oats are sown."

"I can, of course, have no opinion; but the situation is an interesting one."

They turned about, and walked a stretch of the lawn in silence.

"I wish it were over," Isabel said with a sigh. "I wish the poor girl had a good hus-

band and all were well settled. I am tired of playing the farce."

"You look forward with—with equanimity?" Robert said hesitatingly, with a glance at her face.

"More, with eagerness. I want to throw off a weight. I shall be the happiest woman in England."

"On three hundred a year, cousin Isabel?" ventured Asquith.

"On three hundred a year, cousin Robert. I wish I had never had more. Come, we must go back to Rhoda. Isn't Rhoda a dear girl?"

CHAPTER V.

ON specified occasions of assembly at Knights-well, Ada did not ordinarily present herself. Mrs. Clarendon made excuses for her on the plea of indifferent health; habitual visitors understood that Miss Warren suffered much from headaches, and that she could not with impunity expose herself to unusual excitement. The headaches were a fact, but it was probably not on their account that Ada preferred as a rule her own company. Her frequent caustic utterances on the subject of the persons whom society considers, and the things with which society occupies itself, were a sufficient index of her views; the views themselves being a natural outcome of her temperament and the circumstances of her life.

But on the present Monday she appeared. To the last moments Mrs. Clarendon had been in uncertainty as to the likelihood of her doing so, though she had laughingly prophesied the

event to Rhoda Meres, and persisted in spite of the latter's incredulity. Ada had made no great preparations, but was well and suitably dressed. Robert Asquith, to whom all the girl's movements were of extreme interest, promised himself the pleasure of closely observing her throughout the afternoon.

"Tell me something of the people who are coming, will you?" he asked, as he met her in the hall. "The interesting people, I mean, of course."

"That limitation will make the task an easy one," Ada replied as she buttoned a glove. Her colour was rather higher than usual, and her tone was less dry; she looked almost cheerful.

"Then of the less uninteresting; that will leave a margin for conversation, surely?"

"It all depends, of course, on one's point of view. I believe you have considerable powers of being interested, have you not?"

"Yes; I fear I boast of them. You see I find the gift valuable. In my sane moods I had rather have the dullest conversation than none at all."

"Therefore you come to me, waiting for others to arrive."

"Spare me, Miss Warren. You wouldn't believe what toil it costs me to frame and polish

a compliment. I am sure you are naturally humane."

"You are sure of that? To dumb animals, I hope."

"Alas! it brings us back to the animals who are gifted with speech. Shall we have any one who talks well, independently of the matter of discourse? Remember, I am new to English society. I enjoy the gossip of idle people, provided it be good of its kind."

"I am no judge," said Ada; "but I should think Mrs. Bruce Page will satisfy you. Her tongue is so trained in current forms of speech that it has come at last to save her all trouble of superintendence. As far as my experience goes, she is nearly all that the most exacting could require."

"I must study that lady. And what of Miss Saltash, of whom I have heard?"

"Oh, *she* is interesting!" Ada exclaimed. "I have seen her grow red in the face in support of faith in eternal damnation. If that goes, she has nothing to live for."

Robert was obliged to confess to himself that Miss Warren was yet a trifle crude; she amused him, but he took an early opportunity of refreshing his palate from a less acid source. His thoughts continued, however, to busy themselves with her; he awaited impatiently

the arrival of the young man who was supposed to have tenderly impressed this singular heiress.

But the Bruce Pages were late. Before them came Mrs. Saltash of Dunsey Priors, accompanied by her daughter Irene, whom Ada had characterised, and Lady Florence Cootes. The latter was a daughter of the Earl of Winterset; she was a constant guest at Dunsey Priors, being united in bonds of the closest friendship with Irene Saltash. It was a union very greatly indebted to ecclesiastical cement, the young ladies both holding the most pronounced views on the constitution of the world to come, and seemingly desiring to compensate themselves for a gloomy future by enjoyment of a present fruitful in consolations. They seldom quitted each other, and their chatter was lively in the extreme. Other maidens there were, who, in company with two or three young men of unimpeachable dress and converse, speedily betook themselves to lawn-tennis. Mr. and Mrs. Vissian were shortly to be seen among the guests, the lady looking very young and very pretty; she and Rhoda Meres seemed to have a good deal to say to each other. Then, as Asquith walked about with his hands behind him, the wonted smile on his lips, he heard the bustle of a new arrival,

and, turning, was aware of Mrs. Bruce Page. He felt sure of her identity before he had heard her name pronounced. She seemed about the same age as Mrs. Clarendon, and in some eyes probably excelled the latter in attractiveness. With rather too high a colour, she was still decidedly good-looking; not handsome, nor beautiful, but beyond dispute good-looking. Her bodily activity was surprising; she walked with the grace and liveliness of a young girl, and, as she shortly showed at tennis, could even run without making herself in the least ridiculous. Her voice, though a note or two higher than it should have been, had yet musical quality. And the use she made of it! Her greeting of the hostess was one unbroken articulate trill, lasting two minutes and a half; it embodied inquiries, responses, information, comments, forecasts, and ejaculation. All who stood around came in one by one for a share of her exhaustless utterances. She was never at a loss for an instant. Robert was presented to her, and she at once talked to him as if they had been on a footing of intimacy for years. When she interrupted her speech, it was to laugh, and this laugh was perhaps a yet more wonderful phenomenon, so clear and fresh and buoyant was it, and yet so obviously a mere outcome of the automatic

contrivance which performed this lady's social vivacities. She laughed because it helped her to show her teeth, and in general became her features.

"How is it she doesn't lose breath?" Robert whispered presently to Mrs. Clarendon, his face expressive of amazement.

"Hush, that is a secret!" was the reply.

Yet Mrs. Bruce Page was not (I use the conventional standard) vulgar; she never said (as far as one could follow her) a malicious thing, was guilty of no bad taste in choice of expressions, seemed to overflow with the milk of human kindness. A silly woman, but scarcely an offensive one; probably in intimacy capable of making herself delightful and something more. Society was to be credited with this public manner of hers, and society on the whole admired the fruit of its systems.

Behind her came a young lady of seventeen, her daughter, and two young gentlemen, one her brother, the other Mr. Vincent Lacour. The girl was extremely shy, and had not a word to say for herself; having secured Mrs. Clarendon's hand, she continued to hold it, shrinking, as it were, into the shadow of the dear lady whom all who needed a protector loved. The brother, Mr. Selwyn Parkes, was a pleasant-looking young fellow, of eight-and-twenty. It

was in the quality of Mr. Parkes's friend that Vincent Lacour resided at present with the Bruce Pages. Mr. Lacour himself was the last to shake Isabel's hand ; her greeting was that one gives to a favourite, of whom one yet entertains a certain amount of moral disapproval. That Vincent should be a favourite where ladies were concerned was natural enough. His personal advantages were striking. Tall, slim, with a handsome head poised on a delicate neck, he exhibited much of female grace and delicacy, without the possibility of being regarded as effeminate. Of a man's health and muscle he had all that even women demand in their ideal. Black hair and a well-educated black moustache, fine, irresponsible eyes ; these also were properties not to be resisted. If anything, he looked a trifle too intellectual, but this would be pardoned by those to whom it was merely suggestive of the mysterious. Of course Mr. Lacour was conscious enough of the attention he drew, and, to judge from his smile, not at all disposed to shrink from it. He might be a trifle fatuous, but he was very far from being a fool ; his forehead suggested capacity for better things than those he was at present put to.

One of the first things he did was to draw

Mrs. Clarendon a little aside, and speak to her in a hasty whisper.

"I beg of you to keep Mrs. Bruce Page occupied somehow or other. She'll never let me go, and I'm bored unspeakably. Help me, and I am your slave for ever!"

Isabel subdued a smile, and made no direct answer. Just as Vincent made off into a cluster of people, the lady in question hastened to Isabel's side.

"What has that boy been whispering to you?" she asked. "He's in the most execrable temper; it was all we could do to persuade him to come. He vows that his liver is out of order, and that he is possessed by diabolical promptings. Pity me for what I suffer in discharging a mother's duties to him. And, oh, Mrs. Clarendon! let him talk to your cousin—that really charming man! He's got the Civil Service into his head, now, and I'm sure Mr. Asquith can give him useful advice—about offices, and that kind of thing, you know. What *is* to become of the poor boy; I *can't* imagine! I've been at Sir Miles, in letters, for the last ten days, till at length he's as good as told me to mind my own business. Surely, never were brothers so unlike! One satisfaction is that Sir Miles can't possibly live long—if it isn't wicked to say such a thing, and I suppose it

must be. He has heart disease, my dear, and in an aggravated form; so Doctor Norman Rayner tells me. I fear I have increased it by my correspondence. Where is the boy gone to? I must take him to Mr. Asquith."

"The boy" had found a pleasant seat by the side of Miss Rhoda Meres.

"You're not going to play?" he asked, seeing a racket in her hand.

"I'm in the next set," Rhoda answered. She had flushed a little as he took his place by her, and there was a sparkle in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Can't you throw it over? Do get Sophy Page to take your place."

"Why shouldn't I play?" she asked, examining the handle of the racket.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Vincent languidly, leaning back and half-closing his eyes. "Do if you like, of course."

"Have you a headache, Mr. Lacour?" Rhoda asked. "Don't you feel well?"

"The fact is I don't. I feel seedy and bored."

"Pray don't let me bore you——"

She half rose.

"You know very well you don't bore me," he said, looking directly at her. Then he added, "I—I half supposed you would have left Knightswell."

She had a quick reply on her lips, but checked it, and merely said :

“I have not.”

“When do you go back to London?” he inquired, throwing one leg over the other and clasping his hands behind his head.

“On Wednesday.”

“I suppose I shall be back there before very long,” said Vincent, looking meditatively at the sky. “Probably I shall get a clerkship at five-and-twenty shillings a week.”

“I’m afraid you don’t show much energy,” said Rhoda, in a voice which lacked something of the indifference she meant to put into it.

“I’ve told you often enough I have none, Miss Meres. I’m like a piece of sea-weed : my condition is dependent on the weather.”

“It’s fine enough now, at all events,” she said, with an attempt at a laugh.

“Oh, yes ; but there’s the very deuce brewing,” returned Vincent, with characteristic freedom of expression. “I wish,” he added slowly, “I’d somebody to help me—somebody who has energy.”

“Doesn’t Mr. Parkes——”

“Pooh !”

There was silence. Cries came from the tennis players, who were just out of sight, and a hum of conversation from nearer groups.

"What are you going to do when you get back to town, Miss Meres?" Vincent asked, regarding her again.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she answered vaguely. "Live as usual, I suppose; unless I take some decided step."

"Decided step? By Jove, how it refreshes me to hear you speak like that! What decided step?"

"I don't know. I'm very much in your own position, you know; I shall have to earn a living somehow."

She said it very simply, looking down, and making marks on the grass with the handle of the racket.

"A living? Women don't make a living; that's all done for them."

"Is it?" said Rhoda, and, as soon as the words were spoken, she rose, averting her face.

"There's our set called!" she exclaimed; "I must go."

He made a slight gesture as if about to exert himself to detain her; but she was gone. His eyes followed her dreamily.

"Oh, here you are, Vincent!" cried Mrs. Bruce Page, close at hand. "Have you *really* a headache, now? Poor boy! you don't look well. Come along with me, I want you to talk

with Mr. Asquith, Mrs. Clarendon's cousin, you know. He knows all about the Civil Service."

Robert received the young man with a look critical indeed, but good-humouredly so. He did not seem to be able to take Mr. Lacour quite seriously, yet could not refuse a certain admiration.

"You are thinking of the Civil Service examinations?" he began.

"Well, I can't say I've thought much about them," Vincent replied, in his manner suggestive of easy achievement. "I suppose they're very much a matter of form—the elements—and—and so on?"

"Not quite that. And competition, you remember."

"Yes. The truth is, I haven't looked into the thing. What do they expect you to know?"

Asquith gave an outline of the attainments looked for in a candidate for the higher clerkships.

"By Jove, that's pretty strong!" was Vincent's comment.

"The competition," remarked Asquith, "makes it about the severest examination you can undergo."

"Then *that's* all up!" exclaimed the young man. "What would the screw be?"

"You would begin with a hundred a year, and by slow degrees rise to four," said Robert, curling his moustache.

"The deuce you would! Then I may with honour withdraw from so ignoble a competition. You can't suggest any way of making the four hundred at start? I dare say Mrs. Clarendon's told you all about me. I don't mind who knows. There's a great deal of false shame in the world, it seems to me; don't you think so? But I really think it's time I turned to something, and what's the good of one's friends if they can't suggest a plan? Of course the social structure is radically wrong. A man like myself—I have brains, I beg you to believe—oughtn't to find himself thrown out of it in this way. I shall be infinitely obliged to any one who suggests something."

It seemed to Robert, as he listened, that this young man had a turn for affecting an imbecility which was not in truth part of his character; in the matter and manner of his talk, Lacour appeared rather to yield to physical inertness than to disclose natural vacuity. It might be that he was, as he professed, suffering in body; it seemed more probable that he found a luxury in abandoning his mind to sluggish promptings, even as he showed a pronounced disinclination for activity in the disposal of his

limbs. His disastrous circumstances displayed their influence in the whole man. The rate at which he had lived for the past two years was no doubt telling upon him, and nothing tended to counteract, everything rather to foster, the languor which possessed him. His vanity, doubtless, was extreme; the temptation to indulge it no less so. Mrs. Bruce Page, with her semi-sentimental coddling, her pseudo-maternal familiarity, was alone enough to relax the springs of a stronger individuality than Vincent's. Reflecting thus, Asquith maintained silence; when he raised his eyes again he saw that Ada Warren had drawn near.

Lacour gave the girl his hand, and, in a tone of almost ludicrous dolorousness, asked her how she was.

"I think I should rather ask you that," she said, with a laugh; "you have a woful countenance."

"You, at all events, are in excellent spirits," he returned.

It was true, comparatively speaking. A sudden access of self-confidence had come to her, and her manner was at moments almost joyous.

"Have you observed Ada?" Isabel took an opportunity of saying to her cousin apart.

"I see now how wrong and selfish I have been."

And to Ada herself she spoke, finding the girl standing aside whilst general attention was being given to tea and ices.

"You feel well to-day?" she said, with her kindest smile.

Ada murmured something unintelligible and turned away. Mrs. Clarendon reddened slightly and, passing on, met with Vincent Lacour, who was pacing with his hands behind his back.

"Won't you have an ice?" she asked.

"Ice? Great heavens! I should die of dyspepsia. But, Mrs. Clarendon, what is it? Why do you speak and look at me in such an unfriendly way?"

"I am not conscious of doing so. Sit down, and tell me what you have been talking about with Mr. Asquith. Has he given you useful information?"

"Decidedly useful; he's effectually knocked all those plans on the head."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. What is the difficulty?"

"There are just seventeen, one for every minute of our conversation. But very seriously, I want your advice. You know, Mrs. Clarendon, I think a good deal more of your advice than

of any one else's ; pray don't begin to be rusty just when I've most need of you."

"Go on ; I promise not to be rusty," said Isabel, laughing.

"But you are a little rusty, for all that. You're not so free and easy with me as you used to be. I suppose you've heard something new. I can't get on with people—especially women—who won't take me just as I am. You're beginning to disapprove of me, I can see that."

"My dear Mr. Lacour, I have always disapproved of you—in a measure."

"Of course ; but the measure is extending. There's something in your tone I don't like. I always say yours is the one woman's voice I would walk a mile to hear, and to-day it has lost something of its quality for me."

"I grieve exceedingly—except that henceforth you will be saved from the terrible temptation to over-exert yourself. But hadn't we better talk seriously ? What can I advise upon ?"

"Well, it has come to this. Either I go on to the stage, or I go to Texas. Which do you recommend ?"

"Of the two, Texas."

"That is not complimentary, you know."

"I only mean it to be sincere. And I think

it not unlikely that you would do well in Texas. You need that kind of shaking up."

"On the other hand, my advantages are thrown away," remarked Vincent, stroking his chin. He spoke with the completest frankness; it was scarcely possible to call the speech conceited.

"I doubt whether you have any advantages for the stage," said Isabel gravely.

"But, my dear Mrs. Clarendon——"

The talk was interrupted. Lady Florence Cootes came running up.

"Oh, Mrs. Clarendon, I had all but forgotten! I am charged with a message for you from my father. He bids me tell you that he has won his bet, and that it *was* Charibert won the Two Thousand the year before last. It seems you had an argument about it. Do tell me what you've lost?"

"I can't, because I don't know," replied Isabel merrily.

"You don't know? Have you forgotten what the bet was?"

"The stakes were kept secret. If I won I was to ask for anything I chose; if Lord Winterset won he was to do the same."

"If Lord Winterset originated that," observed Vincent, "he's an uncommonly shrewd

man. I shall introduce the idea forthwith to all my female acquaintances."

Lady Florence turned away, with the face of an English virgin.

"Not with mention of the source, Mr. Lacour," said Isabel, in a manner which he could not misunderstand.

And she moved away to mingle with other ladies, a slight shade of vexation on her countenance.

Lacour rose with rather a sour face, and strolled across the lawn, looking about him as if in search of some one. Apparently his search was unsuccessful. The sun was still warm, and he sought for a shady spot, eventually getting to the east side of the house, the opposite to that where the tennis-court lay. A yew-tree hedge divided this part of the garden from the front lawn, and it was free of people. Vincent found himself by the library window, which was low, not more than three feet from the ground. The window standing wide open, he glanced in, and no sooner had done so than he laid his hands upon the sill and neatly vaulted into the room.

Ada Warren was sitting alone. She looked, and was, in fact, a little tired, and had come there for the sake of quietness.

"I have been looking for you, Miss Warren,"

was Vincent's excuse for the intrusion. "You'll let me sit here, won't you?"

"I shall not be so rude as to tell you to go away," she answered in a rather undecided tone.

"That's good of you. Do you know I find it restful to talk to you? I do believe you're the only person I ever spoke to quite seriously.—You don't answer?"

"I was wondering how far that might be a compliment."

"To the very tail of the last word."

"And that was—*ly*, if you remember," said Ada drily, giving the letter *y* its broader value. She looked confused as soon as she had spoken, feeling that the remark ought to have been made in a lighter tone to be quite within the limits of becoming repartee.

Vincent looked at first surprised, then leaned back and laughed.

"I'd no idea you were so witty."

"Nor, perhaps, so ill-mannered?"

It was a little piece of reparation, and probably carried her further than she intended. Vincent leaned forward on a chair which stood between them.

"You study here, don't you?" he asked, with a glance at the books on the table.

"I read here sometimes."

"I suppose you're very clever and very learned, Miss Warren?"

She moved her head slightly, and seemed unable to find a ready answer.

"Your contempt for me," he pursued, "must be unbounded."

"I don't allow myself to despise people with whom I am very slightly acquainted," said Ada; again rather more positively than she had meant. She found such a difficulty in striking with her voice the note corresponding to that which she had in her mind—a difficulty common in people who talk little and think rapidly.

"Well, yes, I suppose there is only a slight acquaintance between us," admitted Vincent. "Not so much, for instance, as would warrant my jumping in by the window just now. I do things on impulse a good deal."

"So do I," said Ada.

"You do? Why, then, there's a point of contact—of sympathy—it would be better to say, I suppose. There are very few people whom I find sympathetic. Do you fare better?"

"I can't say that I do."

Lacour allowed a moment or two to this assertion before he continued:

"I've been trying to get Mrs. Clarendon's help in my difficulties," he said. "She's generally pretty sympathetic, but I believe she's

giving me up. Have you heard her say anything rather savage about me of late?"

"It would be unusual energy in Mrs. Clarendon," was the girl's reply.

"Energy? Well, I don't know; I always thought she had plenty of that. But I understand you. You mean that that kind of society life doesn't conduce to activity of mind—to sincerity, shall we say?"

Ada had meant this, but it did not exactly please her to hear it from Lacour's lips.

"I don't think I ever heard Mrs. Clarendon speak evil of any one," she said, with seemingly needless emphasis, measuring her words as if in scrupulous justice.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he observed; "and it's just what I should have thought. I like Mrs. Clarendon very much, but—well, I can't say that I find in her the moral support I am seeking."

"You are seeking moral support?" Ada asked, looking at him in her direct way, with no irony in her expression.

"Well, that's rather a grand way of putting it, after all, for one who isn't accustomed to pose and use long words. I want help, there's no doubt of that, at all events."

"Help of what kind?"

"Moral help—it's the only word, after all.

Material help wouldn't be out of place, but one doesn't go round with one's hat exactly—till, that is, one's driven to it by what Homer calls a shameless stomach. Don't think I know Homer, Miss Warren ; it's only a phrase out of a crib, which somehow has stuck in my mind."

Ada laughed.

"Now, if you hadn't told me that," she said, "I might have been greatly impressed."

"Pay tribute to my honesty then."

He rose from his leaning attitude and walked a few paces.

"You've no idea," he resumed, facing her, "how much better I feel since I've been talking to you ; upon my word I do. As I said, there's something so restful in your society. You give me ideas, too. I don't feel sluggish as I do at other times."

He paused again, and again resumed. This time with a rather pathetic resignation in his voice.

"I suppose Mrs. Clarendon's advice is the best."

"What was that ?" Ada inquired, her tone colder.

"She said I'd better give up hope in England, and go to some other country. Texas was proposed."

The girl kept silence. If Lacour gauged

her rightly she was reflecting upon this advice as coming from Mrs. Clarendon. Her brows drew together, and there was the phantom of a bitter smile at her lips.

"Mrs. Clarendon thinks you would be better off in Texas?" she asked, with indifference not so skilfully assumed but that this shrewd young man could see through it.

"Yes; she seems to think I should be better off anywhere than in England. I dare say she's right, you know. My friends are about getting tired of me; it's time I made myself scarce."

"And what would you do in Texas?"

"Oh, pretty much anything. The kind of work you see farm labourers doing here—rail-splitting, sheep-washing and driving, and so on."

"You feel a call to such occupations?"

"Well, I have Mrs. Clarendon's advice."

"Mrs. Clarendon's advice!" she repeated.
"Is Mrs. Clarendon's advice decisive with you?"

"I believe she has a friendly interest in me, and I shouldn't wonder if she's right. Other people have advised the same thing. They've given me up, you see, one and all."

His voice was more pathetic still. He had reseated himself, and leaned back with his eyes

closed. Mr. Lacour did this not unfrequently when speaking with persons whom he desired to interest.

She did not speak, and he rose, as if with an effort.

"Well, I'll be off; I bore you. Will you permit me to make use of the window for exit?"

"Why not?" she replied mechanically.

He turned and faced her again.

"Of course fellows sometimes make a fortune out there. I might do that, you know, if only—well, if I only had something to work for."

"A fortune," Ada suggested.

"No, I don't mean that," he replied, with fine sadness. "That doesn't appeal to me. If you can only believe it, I have other needs, other aspirations. The fortune would be all very well, but only as an adjunct. A man doesn't live by bread alone."

She smiled.

"Of course it's absurd," he resumed, making an impatient motion with his hand; "but if only I had a little more impudence I should like to tell you that—well, that it was never so hard for me to bring a talk to an end as this of ours, Miss Warren. You've given me what no one else ever did, but you've—you've taken

something in exchange. I dare say I shan't see you again; will you shake hands with me before I go?"

She stood looking straight into his face, her eyes larger than ever in their desperate effort to read him. Vincent approached to take her hand.

"Ah, there you are!" cried a voice from outside the window. "Vincent, I've been looking for you everywhere; you're keeping us waiting. Miss Warren, I beg your pardon a thousand times; I was so taken up with the thought of that boy that I only saw him at first. I know I shall have your gratitude, however; poor Mr. Lacour is decidedly *ennuyeux* to-day."

His face seemed to indicate a rather more positive state, but it was only for an instant. Then he shook hands hastily, without speaking, and vaulted out into the garden.

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Bruce Page, "that's a nice way of leaving a lady's presence. But I suppose he's practising Texan habits. Good-bye, Miss Warren. Do so wish you'd come over and see us. May I shake hands with you through the window? Indeed, we are bound to be off this instant. Good-bye!"

Rhoda Meres was standing by Mrs. Clarendon in front of the house when Mrs. Bruce Page came round with her captive.

" You'd never believe where I found him !" cried the voluble lady. " Having exhausted the patience of every one else, he'd positively tracked poor Miss Warren—who I'm sure isn't looking very well—to the library, and was boring her shockingly."

Lacour did his bowing and hand-shaking with the minimum of speech. When he touched Rhoda's hand there was something so curious in its effect upon his sense of touch that he involuntarily looked at her face. She was very pale.

CHAPTER VI.

ON the following morning Robert Asquith returned to London, to make ready for his grouse-shooting expedition on Wednesday. Rhoda Meres remained at Knightswell one more day. On Tuesday she was not at all well. Between Ada and her very fair relations existed ; the girls were not intimate, but they generally discovered a common ground for companionship, which was more than could be said of Ada's attitude towards any other female acquaintance. When Rhoda kept her room in the morning it was natural that Ada should go to her, and seek to be of comfort. She could be of none, it proved ; after a few efforts, Rhoda plainly begged to be left alone with her headache.

At midday Mrs. Clarendon herself entered the room, bringing in her hand a little tray. Rhoda was by this time sitting in a deep chair, and professed herself better. She had not slept

during the night, she said, and was feeling the effects ; doubtless the unwonted excitement of the party had been too much for her. Isabel talked to her quietly, and saw that she ate something, then sat by her, holding the girl's hands.

"I have a letter from your father this morning," she said. "He seems to miss you sadly. But for that, I should keep you longer."

"I'm afraid he must get used to it," was Rhoda's reply, cheerlessly uttered.

"Why, dear ?"

"I shall not stay at home."

"What shall you do ?" Isabel asked quietly.

"Go somewhere—go anywhere—go and find work and earn a living!"

"But I think you have work enough at home."

"I am not indispensable."

"I believe you are. I don't think your father can do without you."

"Why can't he ? Hilda is at home quite enough to look after the servant. What else does he want with me ?"

"Much else, dear Rhoda. Your sympathy, your aid in his work, your child's love. Remember that your father's life is not a very

happy one. You are old enough to understand that. You know, I think, that it never has been very happy. Can't you find work enough in cheering him?"

For reply the girl burst into tears.

"Cheer him!" she sobbed. "How can *I* cheer any one? How can I give comfort to others when my own life is bare of it? It's easy for you to show me my duty, Mrs. Clarendon. Tell me *how* I am to do it!"

Isabel put her arm about the shaken form, and there was soothing in the warm current of her blood.

"I cannot tell you how to do it, Rhoda," she said, when the sobs had half stilled themselves. "My own is too much for me. But I can—with such force of love as is in me—implore you to guard against mistakes, beseech you not to heap up trouble for yourself through want of experience, want of knowledge of the world, through refusal to let older ones see and judge for you. My own life has been full of lessons, though I dare say I have not suffered as much as others would have done in my place, for I have a temperament which easily—only too easily—throws aside care. If only I could live it over again with all my experience to guide me!"

"You don't understand me," said the girl,

with a fretfulness she tried to subdue. "You don't know what my trials are. No amount of experience could help me."

"Not against suffering; no. I won't talk nonsense, however well it may sound. But you speak of taking active steps, Rhoda. There experience can give very real aid."

"Mrs. Clarendon," said Rhoda, after a short silence, "I'm afraid I haven't a very good disposition. I don't feel to my father as I ought; I don't care as much for anybody as I ought—for any of my relations, my friends. I'm not happy, and that seems to absorb me."

"You don't care for me, Rhoda?—not for me, a little bit of sincere affection?"

The voice melted the girl's heart, so wonderful was the power it had.

"I love you with all my heart!" she cried, throwing her arms about Isabel. "You make me feel it!"

"Dear, and that is what I cannot live without," said Isabel. "I must have friends who love me—simple, pure, unselfish love. I have spent my life in trying to make such friends. I haven't always succeeded, you know, just because I have my faults—oh, heaps of them! and often I'm as selfish as any one could be. But a good many do love me, I think and trust. Love has a different meaning for you, hasn't it,

Rhoda? I don't think I have ever known that other kind, and now I certainly never shall. It asks too much, I think; mine is not a passionate nature. But if you could know how happy I have often been in the simple affection of young girls who come and tell me their troubles. If I had had children, I should have spoilt them dreadfully."

Her eyes wandered, the speech died for a moment on her lips.

"Rhoda," she continued, taking both the girl's hands, "some day, and before long, I shall want your love and that of all my dear friends more than ever. Something—never mind, I shall want it, and I have tried so hard to earn it, because I looked forward and knew. All selfish calculation, you see," she added, with a nervous laugh, "but then it's only kindness I ask for. You won't take yours away? You won't do anything that will put a distance between us? Nothing foolish? Nothing ill-considered? You see, I'll put it all on my own account. I can't spare you, I can't spare one who loves me!"

Mrs. Clarendon accompanied Rhoda next day to Winstoke station. On her way back she drove to several cottages where it was her custom to call, and where the dwellers had good cause to welcome her. Of sundry things

which occurred to her in the course of these visits, she desired to speak with Mr. Vissian, and accordingly stopped at the rectory before driving through her own gates. The front door stood open, and with the freedom of intimacy, she walked straight in and tapped at the parlour door, which was ajar. That room proving empty, she passed to the next, which was the rector's study, and here too tapped. A voice bade her enter—to her surprise an unfamiliar voice. She turned the handle, however, and looked in.

A young man was sitting in the rector's easy-chair, a book in his hand. He rose on seeing an unknown lady. They looked at each other for a moment, with a little natural embarrassment on both sides. Each rapidly arrived at a conclusion as to the other's identity, and the smile in both cases expressed a certain interest.

"Pardon me," Mrs. Clarendon said; "I am seeking the rector, or Mrs. Vissian: Can you tell me if either is at home?"

"The rector, I believe, is still away," was the reply, "but Mrs. Vissian is in the garden. I will tell her."

But in the same moment Mrs. Vissian appeared, carrying a basket of fruit. She had garden gloves on her hands. Behind her came

Master Percy. There was exchange of greetings ; then, in response to a look from Mrs. Clarendon, the youthful matron went through a ceremony of introduction. Mrs. Clarendon and Mr. Kingcote were requested henceforth to know each other, society sanctioning the acquaintance.

"Your name is already familiar to me," said Isabel ; "I have been looking forward to the pleasure of meeting you some day. It was in fear and trembling that I knocked at the sanctuary ; Mr. Vissian will congratulate himself on having left a guardian. Those precious volumes ; who knows, if there had been no one here——?"

"And how are you, Percy ?" she asked, turning to the child, who had come into the library, and holding to him her hand. Percy, instead of merely giving his own, solemnly knelt upon one knee, and raised the gloved fingers to his lips. His mother broke into a merry laugh ; Mrs. Clarendon smiled, glanced at Kingcote, and looked back at the boy with surprise.

"That is most chivalrous behaviour, Percy," she said.

Mrs. Vissian still laughed. Percy, who had gone red, eyed her reproachfully.

"You know I am a page to-day, mother,"

he said, "that's how a page ought to behave. Isn't it, Mr. Kingcote?"

Isabel drew him to her and kissed him; a glow of pleasure showed through her smiling.

"Percy is a great many different people in a week," explained Mrs. Vissian. "To-morrow he'll be a pirate, and then I'm afraid he wouldn't show such politeness."

"That shows you don't understand, mother," remarked the boy. "Pirates are always polite to beautiful ladies."

There was more laughter at this. Kingcote stood leaning against the mantelpiece, smiling gravely. Percy caught his eye, and, still confused and rather indignant, went to his side.

"Percy still has ideals," Kingcote observed, laying his hand on the child's head.

"Ah, they're so hard to preserve!" sighed Isabel. Then, turning to Mrs. Vissian, "I want a word or two with you about things that are painfully real. Shall we go into the sitting-room?"

She bowed and said a word of adieu to Kingcote, who stood looking at the doorway through which she had disappeared.

Two days later fresh guests arrived at Knightswell, and for a week there was much riding and driving, lawn-tennis, and straying

about the garden and park by moonlight. Then the house of a sudden emptied itself of all its occupants save Ada Warren. Mrs. Clarendon herself went to stay at two country places in succession. She was back again about the middle of September. Ada and she found themselves once more alone together.

Early on the day after her arrival Isabel took a turn of several miles on horseback. She had risen in the morning with somewhat less than her customary flow of spirits, and the exercise would no doubt help her to become herself again. It was a very soft and balmy autumn day ; the sky was cloudy, but not with presage of immediate rain, and the distance was wonderfully clear, the rolling downs pencilled on sky of bluish gray. Sounds seemed unnaturally audible ; she often stayed her horse to listen, finding something very consonant with her mood in the voices of the resting year. When she trotted on again, the sound of the hoofs on the moist road affected her with its melancholy monotony.

“Am I growing old ?” she said to herself. “It is a bad sign when riding fails to put me into good spirits. Perhaps I shall not care to hunt ; a good thing, if it prove so. I lose less.”

She was returning to Winstoke by the old

road from Salcot East, and presently rode past the cottage at Wood End. A window on the ground floor was open, and, as she went by, Kingcote himself came to it, having no doubt heard the approaching horse. Isabel bowed.

"Why didn't I stop and speak?" she questioned herself. "It would have been kind. Indeed, I meant to, but my hands somehow wouldn't obey me at the moment."

A hundred yards farther she met a village lad, carrying a very unusual burden, nothing less than a book, an octavo volume. Isabel drew rein.

"What have you got there, Johnny Nancarrow?" she asked.

The youngster turned the book over, regarding it much as if it were a live thing.

"Fayther picked un oop corner o' Short's Aacre," he replied. "He says it b'longs to the stranger at Wood End, and I've got to taake it there."

"Let me look."

It was a volume of the works of Sir Thomas Browne. Turning to the fly-leaf, Isabel saw the name, "Bernard Kingcote," written there.

"How did it come at the corner of Short's Acre, I wonder?"

"Fayther says the stranger liggs about,

spellin' over his books, and he'll have left this behind un by hap."

She turned over the leaves, absently ; then her face brightened.

"Don't trouble to go any farther, Johnny," she said. "I'll take the book to its owner myself ; I know him. And here's something for your good intention."

She turned her horse. The boy stood watching her, a gape of pleasure on his face, and still gazed, cap in hand, till a turn of the road hid her ; then he jogged back home, whistling. The sixpence had something to do with it, no doubt ; yet more, perhaps, the smile from the Lady of Knightswell.

Isabel rode at a very gentle pace ; once she seemed on the point of checking her horse. But she was already within sight of the cottage, and she went at walking pace up to the door. The window still stood open, and she could see into the room, but it was empty. Its appearance surprised her. The flagged floor had no kind of covering ; in the middle stood a plain deal table, with a writing desk and books upon it, and against the opposite wall was a bookcase full of volumes. A less luxurious abode it would not have been easy to construct. The sides of the room had no papering, only whitewash ; one did not look for pictures or orna-

ments, and there were none. A scent of tobacco, however, came from within.

"One comfort, at all events, poor fellow," passed through her mind. "He must have been smoking there a minute or two ago. Where is he now?"

She knocked at the door with the handle of her whip. At once she heard a step approaching, and the door was opened. Kingcote stood gazing at her in surprise; he did not smile, and did not speak. He had the face of one who has been in reverie, and is with difficulty collecting himself.

"How do you do, Mr. Kingcote?" began Isabel. "I am come to restore to you a book which has been found somewhere in the fields. I fear it has suffered a little, though not so much as it might have done."

He took the volume, and reflected for an instant before replying.

"I thank you very much, Mrs. Clarendon. Yes; I had quite forgotten that I left it behind me. It was yesterday. I should have been sorry to have lost him."

"The book is evidently a favourite; you handle it with affection."

"Yes, I value Sir Thomas. You know him?"

"I grieve to say that I hear his name for the first time."

"Oh, you would like him ; at least, I think you would. He is one of the masters of prose. I wish I could read you one or two things."

"I'm sure I should be very glad. Will you come and lunch with us to-day, and bring the book with you ?"

Kingcote had his eyes fixed upon her ; a smile gathered in them.

"I'm afraid——" he began ; then, raising his eyebrows with a humorous expression, "I am in no way prepared for the ceremony of visiting, Mrs. Clarendon."

"Oh, but it will be in no way a ceremony !" Isabel exclaimed. "You will do me a great pleasure if you come wholly at your ease, just as you would visit Mr. Vissian. Why not ?" she added quickly. "I am alone, except for the presence of Miss Warren, who always lives with me."

"Thank you," said Kingcote, "with pleasure I will come."

"We lunch at half-past one. And you will bring Sir Thomas ? And let me keep him a little, to remove the reproach of my ignorance ?"

Kingcote smiled, but made no other reply. She leaned down from her horse and gave him her hand ; he touched it very gently, feeling that little Percy Vissian's fashion of courtesy would have been far more becoming than the mere grasp one gives to equals. Then she rode away. Isabel was, as we know, a perfect horsewoman, and her figure showed well in the habit. Kingcote fell back into his reverie.

He had but one change of garments at all better than those he wore ; not having donned them for more than two months, he found himself very presentable, by comparison, when he had completed his toilet before the square foot of looking-glass which hung against the wall in his bedroom. His hair had grown a trifle long, it is true, but that rather became him, and happily he had not finally abandoned the razor. His boots were indifferently blacked by the woman who came each day to straighten things, so he took a turn with the brushes himself.

"After all," he reflected, "it is a ceremony. I lack the courage of the natural man. But I would not have her accuse me of boorishness."

And again : "So this is the Lady of Knights-well ? The water of the well is enchanted,

Percy told me. Have I already drunk the one cup which is allowed?"

He reached the house-door just before the hour appointed for luncheon. With heartbeats sensibly quickened he followed the servant who led him to the drawing-room. Mrs. Clarendon and Ada were sitting here together. Isabel presented him to Miss Warren, then took the volume from his hands and looked into it.

"You know Sir Thomas Browne, no doubt, Ada," she said.

"I know the 'Urn-burial,'" Ada replied, calmly examining the visitor.

"Ah me, you put me to shame! There's the kind of thing that I read," she continued, pointing to a "Society" journal which lay on the table. "By-the-bye, what was it that Mr. Asquith said in defence of such literature? I really mustn't forget that word. Oh, yes, he said it was concrete, that it dealt with the concrete. Mr. Kingcote looks contemptuous."

"On the whole I think it's rather more entertaining than Sir Thomas Browne," remarked Ada. "At all events, it's modern."

"Another argument!" exclaimed Isabel. "You an ally, Ada! But don't defend me at the expense of Mr. Kingcote's respect."

"Mr. Kingcote would probably respect me

just as much, or as little, for the one taste as for the other."

"Miss Warren would imply," said Kingcote in a rather measured way, due to his habits of solitude, "that after all sincerity is the chief thing."

"And a genuine delight in the Newgate Calendar," added the girl, "vastly preferable to an affected reverence for Shakespeare."

Kingcote looked at her sharply. One had clearly to take this young lady into account.

"You sketch from nature, I believe, Miss Warren?" he asked, to get the relief of a new subject.

"To please myself, yes."

"And to please a good many other people as well," said Mrs. Clarendon. "Ada's drawings are remarkably good."

"I should so much like to see your drawing of the cottage at Wood End," said Kingcote.

"When was that made?" Isabel inquired, with a look of surprise.

Luncheon was announced. As they went to the dining-room, Kingcote explained that he had passed Miss Warren when she was engaged on the sketch, before ever he had thought of living in the cottage.

"Was it that which gave you the idea?" Isabel asked.

"Perhaps it kept the spot in my mind. I was on a walking tour at the time."

"Not thinking of such a step?"

"No; the idea came subsequently."

During the meal, conversation occupied itself with subjects such as the picturesque spots to be found about Winstoke, the interesting houses in that part of the county, Mr. Vissian and his bibliomania, the precocity of Percy Vissian. Ada contented herself with a two-edged utterance now and then, not given however in a disagreeable way; on the whole she seemed to like their guest's talk. Kingcote several times found her open gaze turned upon himself, and was reminded of the evening when she parted from Mr. Vissian at the gates of Knightswell.

The drawing-room had French windows, opening upon the lawn. When they had repaired thither after lunch, Ada, after sitting in silence for a few moments, rose and went out into the open air. Mrs. Clarendon followed her with her eyes, and seemed about to speak, but in the end let her pass undressed.

Kingcote was examining the caryatides on either side of the fireplace. He turned, saw that his hostess was alone, and came to a seat near her.

"Are you not very lonely in your cottage?" Isabel asked.

"Sometimes, yes. But then I went there for the sake of loneliness."

"It isn't rude to ask you? You are doing literary work, no doubt?"

"No; I am doing no work at all."

"But however do you spend your time in that dreadful place?"

"Dreadful? Does it show to you in that light?"

"Picturesque, I admit; but—"

She paused, with her head just on one side.

"I can well understand the horror with which you regard such a mode of life," said Kingcote, laughing. "But I have never had the habit of luxury, and, so long as I am free, nothing else matters much."

"Free from what?"

"From sights and sounds which disgust me, from the contiguity of mean and hateful people, from suggestions which make life hideous; free to live with my fancies, and in the thoughts of men I love."

Isabel regarded him with a half-puzzled smile, and reflected before she spoke again.

"What and where are all these things which revolt you?" she asked.

"Wherever men are gathered together;

wherever there is what is called Society, and, along with it, what is called a social question."

"But you are not a misanthropist?"

Kingcote was half amused to perceive the difficulty she had in understanding him. Suggestions of this kind were evidently quite new to her; probably she did not even know what he meant by the phrase "social question."

"I am not, I believe, a misanthropist, as you understand the word. But I had rather live alone than mix with men in general."

"To me it would be dreadful," said Isabel, after a moment's thought. "I cannot bear solitude."

"The society of refined and cultured people is the habit of your life."

"Refined—in a sense. Cultured?—I am not so sure of that. You would not call them cultured, the people I live amongst. I am not a clever woman, Mr. Kingcote. My set is not literary nor artistic, nor anything of that kind. I am disposed to think we should come into the category of 'mean and hateful people'—though of course you wouldn't like to tell me so."

"I was thinking of quite other phases of life. My own experience has not been, on the whole, among people who belong to what is

called society. I have lived—in a haphazard way—with the classes that have no social standing, so, you see, I have no right to comment upon your circles."

Isabel glanced at him, and turned her eyes away. A fan was lying on the table close by her; she reached it, and played with the folds.

"But at all events," she resumed, as if to slightly change the tone, "you have had the Vissians. Don't you find them delightful? I do so like Mr. Vissian, with his queer book-hunting, and Mrs. Vissian is charm itself. These are congenial associates, no doubt?"

"Very; I like them extremely. Has Mr. Vissian told you how my acquaintance with him began?"

"Nothing, except that you met somehow in connection with the cottage."

"The good rector is wonderfully discreet," said Kingcote, with a smile. And he related the story of the Midsummer Day on which he walked from Salcot to Winstoke.

"It really was an act of unexampled generosity on Mr. Vissian's part, to trust a stranger, with so dubious a story. But the first edition of '*Venice Preserved*' no doubt seemed to him a guarantee of respectability. I had the book bound during the few days that I spent in

London, and made him a present of it when I returned."

"You have friends in London?" Isabel asked. "Relations?"

"A sister—married. My parents are not living."

"But of friends, companions?"

"One, an artist. Did you visit the Academy this year? There was a picture of his—his name is Gabriel—a London street scene; perhaps you didn't notice it. You would scarcely have liked it. The hanging committee must have accepted it in a moment of strangely lucid liberality. By which, Mrs. Clarendon, I don't mean to reflect upon your taste. I don't like the picture myself, but it has great technical merits."

"Is he young, like yourself?"

"Like myself?" Kingcote repeated, as if struck by the expression.

"Certainly. Are you not young?"

"I suppose so," said the other, smiling rather grimly. "At all events, I am not thirty in years. But it sounded curious to hear the word applied to myself."

Isabel laughed, opening and closing the fan.

"But Gabriel is a fine fellow," Kingcote exclaimed. "I wish I possessed a tenth part of his energy. There he works, day after day

and week after week, no break, no failing of force or purpose, no holiday even—says he hasn't time to take one. He will make his way, of course ; such a man is bound to. Resolutely he has put away from himself every temptation to idleness. He sees no friends, he cares for no amusement. His power of working is glorious."

"He is not, of course, married ?"

Kingcote shook his head.

"That singleness of purpose—how splendid it is ! He and I are opposite poles. I do not know what it is to have the same mind for two days together. My enthusiasm of to-day will be my disgust of to-morrow. I am always seeking, and never finding ; I haven't the force to pursue a search to the end. My moods are tyrannous ; my moods make my whole life. Others have intellect ; I have only temperament."

There was no excitement in his way of uttering these confessions, but he began reflectively and ended in a grave bitterness.

"I think I know something of that," Isabel said in return. "I, too, am much subject to moods."

"But they do not affect the even tenor of your life," said Kingcote. "They do not drive you to take one day an irrevocable step which

you will repent the next. They have not made your life a failure."

"Have they done so in your case?" Isabel asked, with a look of serious sympathy. "Pray remember your admission that you have not yet thirty years."

"The tale of my years is of small account. I shall not change. I know myself, and I know my future."

"That you cannot. And, from what you have told me, I think your present mode of life most unfortunate, most ill-chosen."

There was a shadow at the window, and Ada re-entered the room.

"Won't you let us see the sketch that was spoken of?" asked Mrs. Clarendon, turning to her.

"I don't know where to find it at present," Ada replied, moving to a seat in a remote part of the room.

"Do you think of living in that cottage through the winter?" Isabel asked of Kingcote, when there had been silence for a moment.

"Probably through many winters."

"You remember that there is a considerable difference between our climate at present and what it will be in a couple of months or less."

"I shall lay in a stock of fuel. And it will

interest me. I have never spent a winter in the country ; I want to study the effects."

"The effects, I fear," said Isabel, smiling, "are more likely to be of interest to our good friend Doctor Grayling."

"Or even to the respectable undertaker, whose shop is in the High Street?" added Kingcote, with a laugh. "It doesn't greatly matter."

He rose and walked to the window.

"Do you remain here through the winter?" he asked.

"I believe so; though I cannot say with certainty. I like to be here for the meets."

"The meets?"

"The hunting, you know."

"Ah, you hunt?"

"Mr. Kingcote is shocked, Ada. He thinks that at my age I should have abandoned all such vanities."

"Or perhaps wonders more," remarked the girl, "that you ever indulged in them."

Kingcote looked from one to the other, but kept silence.

"Oh, but we have altogether forgotten Sir Thomas!" Isabel exclaimed. "Where is he? Do read us something, Mr. Kingcote."

Kingcote hesitated.

"There are many passages marked in the

book," he said. "Will you let me leave it with you, that you may glance through it? Perhaps it is better suited for reading to oneself."

"Very well; but I will do more than glance. I *once* knew what it was even to study, Mr. Kingcote, though you will have a difficulty in believing it."

"The idea is not so incongruous," he said, half seriously.

"Though passably so. You are not going?"

"I will, if you please."

A heaviness seemed to have fallen upon him during the last few minutes; a smile was summoned only with difficulty, and his eyes had a weary look.

"But now that we know each other by more than hearsay," said Isabel, "you will come and see us again?"

"Yourself and Miss Warren, gladly; but if I am remiss in visiting you will not misunderstand the reason that keeps me away?"

"It shall be as you wish. Ada and I will let you know when we are alone."

Kingcote made his way back to Wood End.

CHAPTER VII.

SINCE the disclosure made by Asquith to Ada Warren, the latter and Mrs. Clarendon had continued to live on precisely the same terms as before ; no reference, however little explicit, had been made on either side to the subject which naturally occupied the thoughts of both. Ada was not in herself the same as before she understood her position ; many little indications which had been wrought in her showed themselves involuntarily. But not in her behaviour to Mrs. Clarendon ; that, as hitherto, was cold and reserved, at most the familiarity which comes of companionship in the external things of life.

It had always been so ; there was a barrier between the two which only united effort could remove, and, though there had been impulses on both sides, a common emotion had never arisen to overthrow the obstacle. They did not understand each other, and, after so many

years, there was small chance that they ever would.

Very clear in the memory of both was that day when Ada was first seen at Knightswell. Mr. Clarendon died at the end of January ; a fortnight later the child was brought over from London by a member of the deceased man's firm of solicitors. She was poorly dressed, and her teeth chattered after the cold journey. She was handed over to a servant to be attended to, whilst Mrs. Clarendon held a conversation with the lawyer in the library. When the legal gentleman had lunched, and was on his way back to town, Ada was sent for to the boudoir.

An overgrown girl of seven years, with a bad figure, even for a child of that age when grace is not a common attribute, with arms which seemed too long, and certainly were so in relation to the sleeves which cased them, with a thin neck, and a positively ugly face—that was what Isabel saw when she raised her eyes in anticipation at the opening of the door. A face decidedly ugly, and, for Isabel, with something in it more repellent than mere ugliness, something for which she had at once looked, and which she found only too unmistakably. The face regarded her half in fear, half in defiance ; there seemed no touch of shyness in the gaze, and Isabel was not in a mood for per-

ceiving that it was really excess of shyness which formed the expression. The child had been washed and warmed, but had not eaten yet ; she had refused to eat. She and Isabel looked at each other for a little space ; then the latter summoned the attendant maid by a gesture to her side.

"Have her properly clothed," she said in a low voice, "and do what you can to make her at home in the room upstairs. Her own maid will be here to-morrow."

"Yes, ma'am," said the servant ; adding, with a nervous cough, "must it be mourning, ma'am ?"

Mrs. Clarendon uttered a very clear "No," and gave a few other directions.

"Let her be put to bed at seven o'clock, and tell me to-morrow morning how she has passed the night."

All that was as living to-day in Ada's memory as if but a week had intervened. She saw the beautiful black-clad lady sitting by the fire, holding a fan to guard her face against excessive heat, and she heard several of the orders given. That night she had gone to bed hating the beautiful lady with a precocious hatred.

Three days went by before the two met again. Ada was now neatly attired, and her long hair, previously unkempt, had been done

up and made presentable. It only made her neck look the longer and thinner, and put into relief the hard lines of her thin face. The probability was she had hitherto been half-starved. She was brought to the boudoir, and Mrs. Clarendon bade the servant go.

"Will you come and sit here by the fire?" Isabel said, speaking as softly as she could.

A low seat had been put by the hearth-rug in readiness. The child approached, swinging her long arms awkwardly, and seated herself on the edge of it.

"Your name is Ada, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You haven't a father or mother, have you, Ada?"

"No."

"That is why you are come to live with me. I haven't a little girl of my own, so I'm going to take care of you, and treat you like my own child. Do you think you can be happy with me?"

"I don't know."

The child spoke with a detestable London-working-class accent, which made her voice grate on Isabel's ears even more than it otherwise would have done.

"I shall do my very best to be kind to you," Isabel continued, after a struggle with

her feelings. "Have you been happy till now—I mean with the other people in London?"

"No," was the decided answer.

"Weren't they kind to you?"

"I don't know."

Isabel rose and walked about the room. The little creature was loathsome to her.

"Do you like the toys I've got for you?" was her next question from a distance.

"I don't care for toys."

There was another silence.

"Would you rather sit here with me, or be up in your own room?"

"Rather be upstairs."

"Then I'll take you. Will you go hand-in-hand with me?"

She led the child back to the room which had been made into a nursery, and where there were dolls, and bricks, and other things of the kind supposed to be delightful to children.

"Wouldn't you like to dress this nice doll?" Isabel asked, taking up one of the unclad abortions.

"No."

"Have you been to school yet, Ada?"

"Yes."

"And can you read?"

"Yes."

Isabel tested her, and found that the reply

had been accurate ; but for the ear-jarring pronunciation, the reading was remarkable for a child of seven.

A person answering to the description of nursery-governess had been found for the child, and to her care Ada was for a long time almost exclusively left. Isabel went into the nursery daily and spoke a few words. More than this she could not do, her soul was in revolt.

She did not quit Knightswell throughout the summer, but in September she went with friends to the south coast. On her return she paid an early visit to the nursery. It was afternoon, and darkness was gathering. Ada was lying on the floor asleep, a book which she had been reading lying beside her. Isabel knelt down and looked at the child, whose face was still almost haggard, and had an expression of suffering beyond her years.

" You poor, poor thing ! " she said to herself, pitying at last, though she could not do more. " I will try hard to do my duty by you. You will never love me, and will think meanly enough of me some day."

As Ada grew older, the extreme sullenness, which seemed to be her disposition, wore off a little. She was outwardly civilised, she learned to speak the English of refinement, she made for herself all manner of interests, none of them

very childlike ; and to Mrs. Clarendon she assumed the demeanour which was to persist, with very slight alteration, from that time onwards. When she was ten years old Isabel engaged a better governess for her. It became evident that the girl had brains. She showed, too, a pronounced faculty for drawing ; a teacher accordingly came over once a week from the nearest town. At the age of fourteen she for the first time accompanied Mrs. Clarendon to London, and stayed with her there for the couple of months which were all that Isabel permitted herself that year. Ada had her own rooms, and only saw Isabel's most intimate acquaintances ; her time was chiefly devoted to lessons of various kinds.

Isabel took this step in consequence of troubrous symptoms in the girl's life. Ada had always been a perfectly tractable child, and had given as little trouble as a child could. She never cried ; her way of expressing indignation or misery was to hide herself in the remotest corner she could find, and there remain till she was discovered, when she suffered herself to be led away in silence. Only once had Isabel, softly approaching the half-open door of Ada's bedroom at night, believed that she heard a sob. She entered and spoke ; Ada was awake, but indignantly protested that she had not been

crying. Isabel felt that there was not a little obscure suffering in the child's existence, and once or twice, overcome by her compassionate instincts, tried to speak warmly, if perchance she might find a means of winning the confidence which she had not felt able to seek ; but the result was not encouraging. At length it seemed that the hidden misery was taking a form which could not be disregarded, which demanded sympathy and motherly tenderness. Hitherto Ada had shown no objection to meet and speak with the visitors or guests at Knightswell ; all at once she refused to see any stranger, and resolutely kept her own rooms whenever Mrs. Clarendon had company. She would give no explanation ; her eyes flashed passionately, as if in irrepressible irritation, when she was appealed to. And, for the first time in her life, she suffered from ill-health ; severe headache racked her for days in succession.

The attempt which Isabel made to draw near to her in this crisis was the occasion of a scene entirely new in their relations, and not thereafter to be repeated. There were guests at Knightswell, and Ada did not appear. Isabel went to the girl's room, and obtained admission.

" Have you a headache, Ada ? " she asked.

The reply was a short negative.

"Then, why don't you come down? I very much wish you would. Will you come down to please me?"

The girl was sitting at a table, seemingly engaged with her books. In reality she had been motionless and unemployed for a couple of hours. She was pale and her eyes bloodshot.

"No, Mrs. Clarendon," she exclaimed; "I cannot come down to please you! Why should I torture myself to give you pleasure?"

She had risen, and stood with a face of passionate anguish.

"Torture yourself?" Isabel repeated, almost in fear.

"Yes; it is torture, and you might know it. You ask me to meet your friends because you think it, I suppose, a duty to do so; in truth, you are ashamed of me, you had far rather not see me downstairs. I know myself well enough, and I have glasses in my room. I know what these people say and think of me. I can bear it no longer; I want to leave you! I cannot live with you!"

Isabel could not find words to reply. There was a horrible element of truth in the girl's suspicions, though Ada did not and could not know its meaning. It was, indeed, out of mere

consideration for her feelings that Isabel was pressing her to show herself.

"You can't live with me, Ada?" she said at length, in despair that she could not speak with the utterance of true feeling. "Am I unkind to you?"

"You are nothing to me!" was the passionate reply. "Neither kind nor unkind—you are nothing to me, and I am nothing to you! Why did you take me into your house? What interest had you in me? Who am I?"

"Ada, you are the child of a friend of Mr. Clarendon's. Mr. Clarendon desired that I should take you and bring you up, as you had lost your own parents. That is all I know of you—all."

"Then you have done your best, and now let me go. We shall never like each other. You took me from a poor home, and I suppose my parents were poor people. It is not in my blood to like you, or to live your life. When I was a child it didn't matter; but, now I see and understand, I know the difference between us. I will *never* meet people who look on me with contempt! Let me go. I will be a servant; it is what I am suited for. You can't keep me against my will, and I wish to leave you!"

For more than an hour Isabel strove against

this resolve. Her task was a hard one. By mere cold reasoning she had to face the outburst of a nature which was all at once proving itself so deep and vehement. Could she but have called emotion to her aid! Her own impassiveness was her despair. That Ada should leave her was out of the question, yet by what means could she restrain the girl if the latter proved persistent? She could not tell her the truth; that was something she had put off to an indefinite future, it was beyond her strength to face it as a present necessity. The only appeal she could make was one which it cost her unspeakable self-contempt to utter. To tell Ada that it would be gross ingratitude to make this return to her mother by adoption. Well, what else could be said? The misery of degradation brought the first tears to her eyes.

"You don't care whether I am grateful or not," Ada replied, calmer at length, because weak from nervous overstrain. "You care for me less than for your servants. No soul cares for me."

It was this feeling of desolation which had suddenly taken hold of the developed girl. A heart craving for warmth had come to life within her; her senses had awakened to desperate hunger. The pathos in her last utterance was infinite; it touched Isabel to the core.

"It shall not be so, Ada," was her answer to the cry. "We will be more to each other; you shall not suffer from loneliness, poor child! I will never ask you to see people you do not wish to, and I will give you all I can of my own life. Be kind and childlike with me. My heart is not hard, dear."

Not hard, the heart of Isabel Clarendon, but very human, very womanly. It could not throw open its gates unreservedly to this child who had been forced upon her. The tears she shed at Ada's side were bitter and choking; they brought no solace of moved tenderness.

It was the first and the last of such scenes. A couple of years later Ada looked back upon her part in it with that brain-scorching shame to which an intense nature is so subject in recalling immature impulsiveness. For a week or two at most it made anything of sensible difference in her own or Mrs. Clarendon's behaviour, then the unconquerable coldness returned, with an appearance of finality. Their conversation limited itself to superficial matters, and even here occasions of difference not seldom offered, exacting self-control on both sides. Lacking conscious spiritual life, and all but void of intellectual interests, Isabel Clarendon could hardly be credited with principles, but for that reason her prejudices were the stronger. As

Ada grew in mental stature, she found it difficult at all times to avoid involuntary collision with these prejudices, or even to refrain from impatient comment of a kind very irritating to Isabel. Small points of social observance first began to excite the girl's indignant or ironical remark, then graver matters of tradition arose between them—stumbling-blocks for the one, to the other accepted sign-posts. Ada read much, and procured books from very various sources; even had Isabel been sufficiently familiar with the characteristics of authors to judge from their outsides the books she saw lying about, she did not feel strong enough to attempt to impose restrictions on her ward's reading; such a step would assuredly have led to conflicts, and from this Isabel shrank. Ada's tastes seemed to her deplorably masculine; it was very likely, she said to herself, that no positive harm would result to such a nature from literature poisonous to ordinary girls. Fortunately Mrs. Clarendon's conception of responsibility was not that ever-besieging consciousness which leaves some women no rest in a position of superintendence. The instinct of procrastination was strong in her; a thought which troubled her she could, without much difficulty, set aside for entertainment on the morrow. Promising herself that some day she

would have a long and very serious talk with Ada on the grave matters which she ordinarily shunned, for the present she allowed the girl to take her course, and the opportunity to which she often mentally referred never seemed to present itself.

Had Mrs. Clarendon understood the progress of Ada's development she would have been greatly struck with the girl's moderation and self-restraint, instead of being, to her own distress, repelled and hardened by each new manifestation of independence. Regarding Ada's expressions of revolt as mere disconnected phenomena, she was puzzled to account for such evil features in a girl who had been well taught, held apart from the contamination of low associates, and trained in the habits of a refined and wealthy home. One explanation alone occurred to her—the base blood in the child's veins manifested itself in spite of education to a different social sphere. Such a thought was natural and characteristic. Isabel called herself a Conservative in politics ; in social matters she reconciled maxims of intolerance with practical virtues such as we are apt to call divine, because we find them so seldom in humanity. What is called the spirit of the times had access to her only in frivolous babble or inimical caricature. Living on the surface, she had never

been instructed to think for herself in any matter of grave concern ; the criminality of doubt and the obligation of social conformity were formulæ which served her sufficiently for guidance whenever she might feel herself in danger of going astray. With pretty extensive knowledge of the world, her acquaintance with human nature was elementary ; to be forced upon the study of a typical case of divergence from the broad characteristics of respectable upper-class mankind was to have demanded of her an exercise of intellectual charity of which she was incapable.

From one friend alone did she derive assistance in the practical details of her task. This friend was Mr. Thomas Meres, of whom we have already heard as Rhoda's father. His acquaintance she had made in the earliest days of her married life ; he acted as secretary to Mr. Clarendon. Thomas Meres was then a man of thirty ; he had attempted literature, and failed to get a living by it, and had gladly accepted a position which for a time brought means of support for himself and others dependent upon him. These others—Isabel only discovered it after Mr. Clarendon's death—were a wife and two children. One day, when Isabel had been six months a widow, she received from the late secretary a letter of appeal for aid

in desperate circumstances ; a letter which she answered by at once summoning to Knightswell the writer and his two children, girls of four and six respectively. She had always regarded Mr. Meres with favour ; without information as to his private life, she felt that some hidden misery weighed upon him, and that he was a man of much capability and goodness sadly at odds with fortune. At Knightswell she won his confidence, and heard from him a dismal tale of domestic wretchedness. Happily, the main cause of his sufferings had at length abandoned the home she had made no home, and the only present difficulty was to find a means of livelihood. The man himself was starving ; the children were sad-looking little creatures, victims of cruelty and a hard lot. The three remained at Knightswell for several weeks, being of course on the footing of visitors, and receiving kindness which put poor Tom Meres into spiritual bondage for life, bondage he would not have cast off for any luxurious freedom the world could offer him. Eventually a position was found for him, and he returned with his children to London.

Having made Ada's acquaintance in those early days of her rescue from savagery, Meres continued to regard her with living interest, often prophesying to her guardian that she

would grow into a remarkable woman. At least once a year he was at Knightswell, and he followed the course of the child's education with attentive scrutiny. Ada came to like him ; she displayed no childlike fondness for him, any more than for any one else, but she listened with pleasure to his talk, and in turn spoke to him of things of which to all others she kept silence. If Tom did not positively encourage her critical propensities, he was at all events at no pains to check them, and it was from his library that she received books which set her on the track of modern literature, which otherwise she would have discovered much later. Isabel, when her troubles of conscience began, taxed her friend with this.

"It is true," Tom admitted, "I have advised her to read books which I shouldn't give to ordinary girls. Ada is not an ordinary girl. Do not distress yourself, dear lady ; no ill will come of it. It is only making smooth for her a path which would otherwise be intolerably rough."

"But isn't it leading her where she wouldn't otherwise be tempted to go ?" asked Isabel.

"I can assure you, no. Rough or smooth, she will take this direction. But would you rather I did no more ? Your wish is supreme."

" You are a vastly better judge in these matters than I am," said Isabel modestly (meaning what she said, though not perhaps quite feeling it), " and I know you will be careful. I myself am helpless with Ada ; my guardianship is nominal, I am sorry to say."

To this friend it was that Ada had now of late been in the habit of going when she wished to have the change of London life, and now that she no longer accompanied Mrs. Clarendon during the season. The arrangement was a good one. Isabel had in the first place protested, trying to point out to the girl the advantage of making acquaintances in London other than those which Mr. Meres could offer her. Ada smiled in her least pleasant way, and Isabel surrendered the point, not in her heart sorry to be free when she took her own recreation.

" What do you think of Mr. Kingcote ? " Isabel asked Ada, as they drank tea together after the visitor had left.

" I can't judge him on so slight an acquaintance," the girl answered. " I like his voice."

" Strange that I was going to say the same thing. You shouldn't have gone out whilst we were talking. He, at all events, will not drive

you away with—what do you call it?—imbecile chatter."

"He seems to be a man of some culture. I don't know that he will find us very attractive."

"My poor self, certainly not. But it would be pleasant if he and you found some interest in common, wouldn't it? We must have him with the Vissians to dine."

"Your social instincts are really remarkable." It was a noteworthy point that Ada had never learnt to address Mrs. Clarendon by any name save the formal one. "Do you think Mr. Kingcote is prepared for formal dining?"

"By-the-bye, most likely not," said Isabel, laughing. "But it will be a charity to persuade him to come here sometimes. However, I don't think he'll live there through the winter."

"Doesn't it occur to you that he may have gone there because he finds a difficulty in living in ordinary ways?"

"Yes, very likely."

She reflected, adding presently:

"He has a nice voice."

CHAPTER VIII.

ADA was outwardly more restless than usual. A taste for rambling possessed her ; she disappeared for long afternoons, and did not take her sketching implements, though the country was in its finest autumn colouring. Probably she was weary, for the time, alike of books and drawing. In all her interests she had periods of enthusiasm and of disgust ; days when she worked incessantly from dawn till midnight, grudging scanty intervals for meals, and others when nothing could relieve her *ennui*. She did not ride, in spite of her opportunities ; walking was the only out-of-door recreation possible to her.

One evening, a week after Mr. Kingcote's visit, she returned only just in time for dinner at seven o'clock, and, after sitting in silence through the meal—she was alone with Mrs. Clarendon, who was likewise indisposed for talking, and had a look of trouble seldom seen

on her face—went to the library to read or otherwise occupy herself. A servant brought a lighted reading-lamp, lowered the blinds, and drew the heavy red curtains across the window recesses.

Left alone, Ada consulted her watch, and, stepping to the window which looked from the end of the house on to a shrubbery, put aside one of the curtains. She had scarcely done so when she heard a light tap on the outside of the pane. The sound made her start and draw a little away ; she looked nervously to the door, then ran across the room and, with precaution, turned the key in the lock. Her face was slightly flushed and her manner nervous. After the lapse of a minute there came a repetition of the tapping from without. She quickly raised the blind and lifted the lower sash of the window, then again drew back. A man forthwith vaulted into the room. He looked about him, closed the window, drew down the blind, and, turning once more, presented the familiar figure of Mr. Vincent Lacour.

“ This is really awfully kind of you, Miss Warren,” were his words, as he came forward to shake hands. He spoke with subdued voice, and his demeanour was not quite as self-possessed as usual. “ I was beset with doubts—whether you had my note safely, whether you

could manage to be here alone, whether you would admit me at all. I know it is an unwarrantable step on my part, but I was bound to see you once more, and see you alone. I'm leaving England in a few days, so I'm not likely to annoy you after this."

He had expressive eyes, and put much into them, as he gazed at the girl after speaking thus. Ada's hands hung before her, nervously clasped, with the backs together.

"I of course ought not to consent to an interview of this kind," she said coldly. "Mrs. Clarendon would be much displeased—would altogether misunderstand it. I hope you will say what you wish to very quickly."

"Are we safe from disturbance?" he asked.
"Do people come in?"

"No one will come in."

He uttered a sound of satisfaction.

"I discovered," he said, "that you and Mrs. Clarendon were alone, or of course I couldn't have ventured. If you knew what I've gone through in the last month, since I was talking with you in this room! And not an hour but your voice has been present with me. Do you know that your voice is unique? I have heard voices more musical—don't think I'm talking mere nonsensical flattery—but never one that dwelt with me for long after, as yours does. I

suppose it is half your manner of expressing yourself—your frank directness."

Whether he was sincere or not, it was impossible at least to gather evidence of insincerity from his words and the way in which they were uttered. There was no touch of a wheedling note, not an accent which jarred on the sufficiently discriminating ear of the listener. He seemed more than half regardless of the effect his speech might produce; the last sentence came forth in a rather absent way, whilst his eyes were apparently occupying themselves with a picture hanging near him.

"What was it you wished to say to me, Mr. Lacour?" Ada asked, when she had let a moment of silence pass. She still stood in the same attitude, but was now looking at him, her hard features studiously impassive.

"To say good-bye to you, and—and to thank you."

It was uttered with an effort, as if the tone of mere frankness had been rather hard to hit, and might easily have slid to one of softer meaning.

"To thank me for what, pray?"

She was smiling slightly, perhaps to ease her features.

"For having shown me my ideal woman, the woman in whose existence I believed,

though I never hoped to see her. I was tired of the women who cared for and studied nothing but the art of fooling men ; I wanted a new type, the woman of sincerity. I don't know whether you've noticed it—I'm something of an artist in my way. I can't paint, and I can't write, but I believe I have the artist's way of looking at things. I live on refinements of sensation—you know what I mean ? There's nothing good or valuable in me ; I've no moral force ; I'm just as selfish as I can be ; but I have a sort of delicacy of perception, I discriminate in my likings. Now you've heard all sorts of ill of me, of course ; you've been told I pitched away ten thousand pounds in less than a couple of years ; that I've—— Well, never mind. But, Miss Warren, I haven't lived a life of vulgar dissipation ; I have not debased myself. My senses are finer-edged than they were, instead of being dulled and coarsened. I've led the life a man ought to lead who is going to be a great poet—though, as far as I know, I haven't it in me to be that. But at least I understand the poetical temperament. I couldn't help my extravagance. I was purchasing experience ; the kind of experience my nature needed. Others feed their senses grossly ; that would have cost less money, but my tendencies are not to grossness. I had certain

capacities to develop, and I obeyed the need without looking very far ahead. Capacities of enjoyment, I admit; entirely egoistic. An egoist; I pretend to be nothing better. But believe me when I tell you that the admiration of a frank egoist is worth more than that of people who pretend to all the virtues. It is of necessity sincere."

Ada had seated herself whilst these remarkable utterances were falling upon her ear. Lacour knelt upon a chair near her, leaning over the back.

"You are leaving England?" she said, quietly reminding him of the professed object of his visit.

"A place has been offered me in a house of business in Calcutta; I have no choice but to take it. Or, rather, there is an alternative; one I can't accept."

"Will you tell me what that is?"

She looked up, and he smiled sadly at her. His face just then had all that a man's face can possess of melancholy beauty. The fineness of its lineaments contrasted remarkably with Ada's over-prominence of feature. Hers was the individual countenance, his the vague alluring type.

"My brother," he replied, "had been persuaded to offer me an allowance of two hundred

a year, on condition that I do what I originally intended, read for the Bar."

"And that you can't accept? Why not?"

"For the simple reason that I *should* not read. I should take the money, get into debt, do nothing. I am past the possibility of voluntary work. In a house of business I suppose I shall be made to work, and perhaps it may lead to a competence sooner or later. But for reading here at home I have no motive. I lack an impulse. Life would be intolerable."

Ada did not raise her eyes. He was still leaning forward on the back of the chair, but now at length held himself upright, passed his fingers through his hair, and uttered an exclamation of weariness.

"So I go to India!" he said. "The climate is of course impossible for me; I suffer enough here. Well, it can't be helped."

He sat down opposite the girl, bent forward, and let his face fall upon his hands.

"Other men of my age," he murmured, "are beginning the work of their life. My life is as good as over. I have capabilities; I might do something if I had an impulse."

He looked at her. Her face was as impossible as stone, her eyes closed. Lacour reached forward and touched her hand, making her start into consciousness.

"Will you lend me your hand one moment?" he asked in an irresistible voice, a low, tired breathing.

Ada did not resist. She had to bend forward a little; he put her palm against his forehead. The man was not merely acting; not purely and simply inventing poses; if so, how came his brow so terribly hot? Yet at this moment the question uppermost in his brain was—whether Ada knew the contents of Mr. Clarendon's will. He had no means of ascertaining whether or not she had been enlightened. He could scarcely ask her directly.

The girl drew her hand away, and rose from her chair. She breathed with difficulty.

"How cool that was!" he said. Perhaps he had not noticed that her palm was like fire. "That is again something I never yet felt." Then, with sudden energy: "Miss Warren, what on earth do you think of me? Do you think I am unconscious of the supremely bad taste I show in coming here and talking to you in this way? I have kept away as long as ever I could—a whole month. I was absurd that last time I talked to you. I don't charge myself with iniquities; in fact, I don't know that I recognise any sin except sins against good taste. This present behaviour of mine is in

the very worst. You understand me as well as if I had spoken out the whole monstrous truth ; you judge me. Well, you shall do it in my absence. Good-bye."

She let him take her hand again. He looked at the palm, appeared to be following the lines.

" That is the line of the heart ; that of the head. Both strong and fine. If I were a man of means, or even a man with a future, I would ask you to let this hand lie a little longer in mine, now and afterwards——"

He looked once more into her face ; she saw that his eyes were moist.

" Mr. Lacour, please to leave me !" Ada suddenly exclaimed, rousing herself from a kind of heaviness which had held her inactive and irresponsible. Then she added : " I cannot aid you. We all have our lives to live ; yours is no harder than mine. Try your best to be happy ; I know nothing else to live for."

" Will—you—help me ? " he asked, plainly enough at last. " It has come, you see, in spite of everything. Will you help me ? "

" I cannot. You mean, of course, will I promise to be your wife. I shall make that promise to no one till I am one-and-twenty."

It was a flash of illumination for Lacour.

" Not even," he inquired, with a smile

of quiet humour, "when Mrs. Clarendon marries?"

"When Mrs. Clarendon marries?" Ada repeated, not exactly with surprise, but questioningly.

"You know that she is going to marry Lord Winterset, and very soon? Why, there is another terrible mistake; I ought not to have mentioned it if you do not know it. I thought it was understood."

"Perhaps it is," returned Ada, a curious expression in her eyes. "It does not matter; it does not affect me. I beg you not to stay longer. Indeed, we have no more to say to each other."

"May I write to you from India?"

"If you still have the slightest interest in me; I shall be glad to hear you have got there safely. I must leave you now."

He had retained her hand for the last few moments, and now she felt herself being softly drawn towards him.

"My hand!" she exclaimed almost hysterically. "Release it! I order you to leave me!"

She tore it away and fell back several paces; then, as he still remained motionless, she went to the door and opened it. Lacour turned away; it was to hide the smile which

rose when he heard the lock. In another moment he was once more in the garden.

There was moonlight by this time; the lawn was unshadowed, and he had to pass before the house in order to get into the park, and thence by a track he had in mind which would bring him into the high road. Close at hand, however, was the impenetrable gloom of the shrubbery, and, just as he was moving away from the end of the house to make a bold start across the open, there issued from the trees the form of a lady, who stepped quickly up to him.

"Mr. Lacour," she said, recognising him without difficulty, "will you have the goodness to explain this to me?"

He had never yet heard Mrs. Clarendon's voice speaking thus; it impressed him.

"What is the meaning of your presence in my house, and your very unusual way of leaving it?"

Vincent owed it to himself to make the most of this present experience. He was not likely again to see such an embodiment of splendid indignation, nor hear a voice so self-governed in rich anger. It was a pity that he had for the moment lost his calmer faculties; it cost him no little effort to speak the first few words of reply.

"I can only ask you to forgive me, Mrs. Clarendon——"

He was interrupted.

"Kindly follow me," Isabel said. She led the way along the edge of the bushes and out of sight of the house. Then she again faced him.

"It is all grievously irregular," Lacour pleaded, or rather explained, for the brief walk had helped him to self-command. "I need not say that I was alone in devising the plan. I wanted to speak with Miss Warren, and I knew her habit of sitting alone in the library. The window stood open ; I entered."

"May I ask for what purpose you wished to speak with Miss Warren ?"

"I fear, Mrs. Clarendon, I am not at liberty to answer that question."

"Your behaviour is most extraordinary."

"I know it ; it is wholly irregular. I owe you an apology for so entering your house."

"An apology, it seems to me, is rather trivial under the circumstances. I don't know that I need pick and choose my words with you, Mr. Lacour. Doesn't it occur to you that, all things considered, you have been behaving in a thoroughly dishonourable way—doing what no gentleman could think of ? If I am not mis-

taken, you were lately in the habit of professing a desire for my good opinion ; how do you reconcile that with this utter disregard of my claims to respect ? ”

“ Mrs. Clarendon, it is dreadful to hear you speaking to me in this way. You have every right to be angry with me ; I reproach myself more than you reproach me. I did not think of you in connection with Miss Warren. I could not distress or injure you wittingly.”

“ I don’t know that you have it in your power to injure me,” was the cold reply. “ I am distressed on your own account, for I fully believed you incapable of dishonour.”

“ Good God ! Do you wish me to throw myself at your feet and pray you to spare me ? I cannot bear those words from you ; they flay me. Think what you like of me, but don’t say it ! You cannot amend me, but you can gash me to the quick, if it delights you to do that. I won’t ask you to pardon me ; I am lower than you can stoop. The opinion of other people is nothing to me ; I didn’t know till this moment that any one could lash me as you have done.”

Isabel was frightened at the violence of his words ; they must have calmed a harsher nature than hers. His earnestness was all the more terrible from its contrast with his

ordinary habit of speech, and his professed modes of thinking. His voice choked. Perhaps for the first time in her life Isabel recognised the fulness of her power over men.

"Mr. Lacour," she said with grave gentleness, "is this the first of your visits to Miss Warren?"

"It is the first."

"Will you promise me that it shall be the last—I mean of secret visits?"

"I will never see her again."

"I exact no such promise as that; it is beyond my right. What I do regard as my right is the assurance that my ward has fair play. Her position is difficult beyond that of most girls. I have confidence in Ada Warren; I believe she respects me—perhaps I should say she recognises my claims as her guardian. My house is open to you when you come on the same footing as other gentlemen."

"I cannot face you again."

"Where do you intend to pass the night?" Isabel inquired, letting a brief silence reply to his last words.

"I have got a room at the inn in Winstoke."

"And to-morrow morning you return to London?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Bruce Page tells me your brother is making you an allowance. I am glad to hear that, and I hope you will heartily accept his conditions."

"I shall try to read, but there's small chance of it ever coming to anything. I'm one of those men who inevitably go to the dogs. A longer or shorter time, but the dogs eventually."

"That is in your own hands. Shall I tell you what I think? Just one piece of my mind which perhaps you will rate cheaply enough. I think that a man who respects himself will make his own standing in life, and won't be willing to be lifted on to smooth ground by any one, least of all by a woman's weak hands. And now, good night to you."

She left him and entered the house by the front door.

After breakfast next morning, Ada was in the library, walking from window to window, watching the course of clouds which threatened rain, at a loss, it seemed, how to employ herself. She was surprised by Mrs. Clarendon's entrance.

"You haven't settled to work yet?" Isabel said, looking at her rather timidly.

Ada merely shook her head and came

towards the table. Mrs. Clarendon took up a book and glanced at it.

"What are you busy with now?" she asked lightly.

"Nothing in particular. I've just finished a novel that interests me."

"A novel? Frivolous young woman! Oh, I know that book. It's very nice, all but the ending, and that I don't believe in. That extravagant self-sacrifice is unnatural; no man ever yet made such a sacrifice."

"It doesn't seem to me impossible," said Ada.

"No? It will some day."

Isabel's way of speaking was not altogether like herself; it was rather too direct and abrupt.

"Of a man, you think?"

Isabel laughed.

"Oh, of a woman much more! We are not so self-sacrificing as they make us out, Ada."

She took a seat on a chair which stood edgewise to the table, and rested her head against her hand.

"Will you sit down?" she asked invitingly, when the girl still kept her position at a distance.

"You wish to speak to me?"

Ada became seated where she was.

"You wish the distance to represent that

which is always between us?" Isabel remarked, half sadly, half jestingly.

Ada seemed about to rise, but turned it off in an arrangement of her dress.

"When Mr. Asquith told you something from me a month ago," Isabel continued, "did it occur to you that I had any motive in—in choosing just that time, in letting you know those things just when I did?"

Ada had fixed a keen and curious look on the speaker, a look which was troublesome in its intensity.

"I supposed," was her measured reply, "that you thought I had come to the age when I ought to know something of the future that was before me."

"Yes, that is true. You will credit me, will you not, with a desire to save you from being at a disadvantage?"

"Certainly."

The word was rather ironically spoken.

"You perhaps think I ought to have told you sooner?"

"I have had that thought."

"On the other hand, you do not forget that nothing obliged me to tell you for another year and a half."

"Nothing obliged you."

Isabel suffered from the keen annoyance

which this dry manner of the girl's always occasioned her. She did not speak again till she felt able to do so with a voice as quiet as before.

"When I spoke of your being at a disadvantage, I meant, of course, that it was hardly right for others to be aware of facts about you which you yourself did not know."

"I gathered that from your words."

"Ada, I wish I had more of your confidence. I am not very good at this stagey sort of talk ; it is not natural to me ; it brings me into a tone which is the very last I wish to use to you. I asked my cousin to relieve me of the duty of telling you about the will because I did not feel quite able to do it myself ; I was rather afraid of myself—of being led to say things I should be sorry for. As you know very well, I'm quick-tempered, and not quite as wise a woman as I might be. I feared, too, lest *you* might say things I couldn't bear to hear. Well, what I want to ask you is this : Do you understand how difficult my position is with regard to you ? Do you see how we differ from ordinary guardian and ward, and how all but impossible it is for me to give you those pieces of advice, those warnings which, as an older woman, I should be justified in offering ?"

"Advice, warning?" repeated Ada, without much curiosity.

"Both. You have had very slight opportunities of getting to know the world. You prefer your books to society, and perhaps rightly; but that must not bring you to forget that you are heiress to a large fortune, and—and that other people—our friends—are well aware of it."

Ada laughed silently.

"You wish, Mrs. Clarendon, to put me on my guard?"

"I do."

The silent laugh had covered a distortion of features, as if by bodily pain. The girl's eyes began to take on that wide, dangerous look which Isabel knew well and feared; there was a motion of her shoulders also, like a result of physical uneasiness.

"Wishing me," Ada pursued, in a higher note, "at the same time to understand that no one is at all likely to seek me out for my own sake."

"Ada, I did not say that, and I did not mean it; you might at least spare to charge me with malice which is not in my nature. Let us speak freely to each other now that we have begun." Isabel's colour had heightened, and

her words lost their deliberateness. "I know too well what your opinion of me is. You think me a vain, superficial, worldly woman, ready to make any sacrifice of my pride—the poor pride that every creature has—just for the sake of keeping my place and the means to support it, and overflowing with bitterness against the one who will some day take everything from me. It is natural; you have never exerted yourself to know me better. It is natural, too, because I *have*, in fact, made an extraordinary sacrifice of my pride, have eaten my own shame with every mouthful under this roof since my widowhood—oh, since my marriage! For all that, I am not evil-natured; it is not in my heart to cherish malice. I do not feel hardly to you. Put it down to my poor spirit if you like, but the resentment I once had I have quite got over, and I wish you nothing but good. Why do I say all this? Only because I want to convince you that, if you ever take me into your confidence, I shall not advise you with selfish motives. And there was no selfishness in what I said to you just now. It was my duty to say it, misunderstand my words how you may."

The silence which followed seemed a long one. Isabel had hidden her face. Ada was making marks on the table with a pencil.

"I don't think," replied the latter at length, "that I have ever charged you in my mind with this kind of selfishness ; you are quite mistaken in what you say of my opinion of you. Please to remember, Mrs. Clarendon, that I too have my difficulties. I have not reached this age without questioning myself about many things. I have long ceased to be a child ; the world is not so simple to me as it was then. Many things require explanation which as a child I scarcely troubled about or explained as a child does."

Isabel uncovered her face and regarded the girl gravely. Ada returned the look.

"I once asked you," the latter continued, in a lower voice, and with hurried utterance, "to tell me something about myself—how I came to be living with you. You only tell me that I was an orphan. Am I ever to know more ?"

"I cannot tell you more than was told to me," Isabel replied coldly. "When I myself sought an explanation of Mr. Clarendon's will, Mr. Ledbury, one of the trustees, for answer put into my hands two papers. One was a formal letter addressed to Mr. Clarendon, and signed 'Marian Warren,' in which the writer said that she consented to her child Ada being given into Mr. Clarendon's care, and renounced all authority over the child henceforth. The

other was a certificate of the same child's birth ; the parents' names, Henry and Marian Warren. That, as you know, is how you are described in the will. My solicitor made inquiries for me. Your mother was found to be a widow ; her husband had been dead not quite a year."

She paused, then added in the same distant way, but with a softer voice :

" I know nothing more, Ada."

" Not whether my mother still lives or not ? "

" No. If you wish to seek further, it is to Mr. Ledbury, I suppose, that you must apply. I am not in personal communication with him, but I can give you his address."

" Will you kindly do so now, then we shall not need to speak of this again."

Ada wrote it as it was spoken. Then they both sat in silence, Ada playing with her pencil. When Mrs. Clarendon rose the girl did not at once seem to notice it ; but Isabel remained standing before her, and Ada, rising at length, stood with averted face. Isabel spoke :

" Only one word more, Ada. We will not speak again of my duties, but I think you will admit that I have certain rights. Will you promise me that I shall not be left in ignorance of any—any step of importance that you may

take—anything you may do that—selfishly speaking—could affect my own position?"

"That is clearly your right," was the answer. "There is no need to ask me for such a promise."

Isabel bowed her head and passed from the room, Ada standing with her face still averted, a nervous tension in her whole frame. They were no nearer to each other for this scene, ending in humiliation which was mutual though differently felt.

CHAPTER IX.

HERE are portions of two letters written by Bernard Kingcote to correspondents in London. The first is to his friend Gabriel, the artist.

“ There is no doubt about its being a mistake, but what step that I have hitherto taken in my life of nine-and-twenty years has been anything else ? Whether I act on impulse or after grave deliberation, is all one. You prophesied that I should be miserable in three months ; it was a generous limit. I have been here three months, and have been miserable already for two. The idea of this kind of life for a permanency was as absurd as most other ideas which I embrace in splenetic moods. The serious thing is that circumstances seem conspiring to keep me here ; I am considerably poorer than when I came, and the possibility of returning to live in London grows dubious. And why should I return ? I have as little business there as here.

“ I believe I had a thought in coming to

this cottage, something more definite than the mere revolt of weariness with old conditions. It ran in my head something like this : If I was such a superlatively bilious and contumacious being, if life refused to present to me any feature by which I might clutch it, if eating my heart out appeared to be the sole occupation which I pursued unremittingly, surely there must be some discoverable reason of all this, must be some explanation of myself to be got at by diligent search. It struck me that in absolute solitude, in the remoteness of a corner of the world such as this, I might perchance have it out with myself, grip myself by the throat as it were, and force a confession of my own secret. There in London I was too closely guarded by habits, occupations, prejudices, conventional modes of thought ; the truth would not be uncovered. Perhaps an utter change of conditions would make me clearer-brained, more capable of discerning the powers at work in me, of discovering whether there was not some compromise with life still possible. This was not unreasonable, it seems to me, and indeed I persuade myself that one or two points have come out where before was nothing but darkness. Unfortunately, to formulate my needs is not the same thing as to satisfy them, and satisfaction being

as remote as ever, I fear I am not much advanced.

"I pass my days in a dream, which too often becomes a nightmare. It is very likely you are right, and that with every day thus spent I only grow more incapable of activity, instead of making advance by a perception of what I could and ought to do. I find myself regarding with a sort of dull amazement every species of active and creative work. A childish wonder at the commonest things besets me. For example, I fall a-thinking on this cottage in which I live, speculating as to who may have originally built it ; and then it strikes me as curious that I dwell beneath its roof, waking and sleeping, with such complete confidence, taking for granted that the workmanship was good, the material sound, no flaw here or there which will some day bring the timbers down upon my head. It leads me on to architecture in general ; I ponder on huge edifices, and stand aghast before the skill and energy embodied in them. In them, and in all the results of the world's work. The sum of human endeavour weighs upon me, something monstrous, inexplicable. I try to realise the motive force which can have brought about such results, and come only to the despairing conclusion that I am not as other men, that I lack

the primal energies of human life. You and your ceaseless striving come before me: I marvel. What is it that drives you on? What œstrus possesses you? What keeps your brain resolute and your hand firm?

"I buy a newspaper now and then. You cannot imagine how strangely those world-echoes impress me. The sage gravity of leading articles, the momentousness of this or that piece of news, the precision of reports, the advertisements,—is it I who am moonstruck, or the living puppets that play in this astonishing comedy? Once or twice I have been so overcome with a perception of ludicrousness as to fall back in my chair and make the roof ring with laughter.

". . . A favourite walk is up to the old entrenchments on the Downs, six or seven miles away. They are of præ-Saxon times, I am told, points of desperate resistance by the aboriginal people against vaguely-named invaders, scenes of battle whereof no spearclang echoes in the pages of history. I like to lie on the ground and dream myself into realisation of those old struggles, to make the fight a present fact, and hear the cries of victory and death. *They* were in earnest! If one could have lived in such times, when the conditions of life were frankly bestial, and

every man's work was clear before him, not a doubt to begin with, so no regret in the end ! One would have been dead so long since, resting so long.

" . . . I delight in the conditions of rustic life as it exists here about me. At times I talk with a farm-labourer, for my solace ; to do so I have to divest myself of the last rag of civilisation, to strip my mind to its very kernel. Were oxen suddenly endowed with speech they would utter themselves even as these peasants do, so and no otherwise. The absence of any hint of townish Radicalism is a joy to me ; I had not expected to find the old order so undisturbed. Squire and parson are still the objects of unshaken reverence. It is not beautiful, but how wholesome ! If only the schoolmaster could be kept away ; if only progress would work its evil will on the children of the slums, and leave these worthy clodhoppers in their ancient peace ! They are happy ; they look neither before nor after, for them the world has no history, the morrow no futile aspirations ; their county is the cosmos, and around it still flow the streams of ocean. Local charity abounds ; in the cottages there is no hunger, no lack of clothing. Oh, leave them alone, leave them alone ! Would I had been born

one of these, and had never learned the half-knowledge which turns life sour!

“ But I have news for you. I have lunched at Knightswell, and in a manner have made acquaintance with Mrs. Clarendon. She astonished me by presenting herself at my cottage door, holding in her hand a book which I had left by chance out in a field, and which had been shown her by the finder. Here was condescension! However, she spoke to me with extreme friendliness, seemed anxious to know more of me, asked me at once to lunch. I went, and was alone for a couple of hours with her and Miss Warren. The latter is as cold and hard as I expected to find her; intellectual, I should fancy, but in the way one does not desire in a woman. She says disagreeably sharp things in precisely the most disagreeable manner. It puzzles me to imagine the kind of life those two lead together, or what may be the explanation of their living together at all. I fancy the Vissians know all about it, but their loyalty to the Lady of Knightswell is magnificent. I am sure they would not feel justified in uttering a word about her private concerns, in however harmless a fashion.

“ Mrs. Clarendon is to me a new type of woman—new, that is, in actual observation.

She is a woman of the world ; perhaps even a worldly woman. I was never before on terms of friendly intercourse with her like, and she interests me extremely. She is beautiful, and has every external grace, I should think, wherewith woman can be endowed ; but I am disposed to think her cold. I mean she does not seem to me capable of passion ; probably she never loved any one. About her husband —dead for twelve years—I can learn nothing ; her marriage with him was most likely one of convenience. At all events she lives in joyous widowhood ; enough to show — all things considered—that her nature is very placid. The kind of woman, no doubt, who appreciates this freedom and realises no disadvantages attendant upon it. Another conclusion I have arrived at is, that her charm has gained in the course of years ; she is more delightful now than she was in her girlhood, it may be, even more beautiful. This is mere assumption, of course ; but warrantable, I think. It may come of my distaste for young girls. I never met one who did not seem to me artificial, shallow, illiberal, frivolous, radically selfish. A girl's ignorance of the world is portentous, the natural result of her education ; and it is only with knowledge of the world that sweetness and charity and steadfastness de-

velop. Heaven preserve me from falling in love with a young girl who still has her first man's heart to break!

"Her charm is, I think, largely unconscious. I mean, though she must know that she is charming—how many must have told her so!—she does not appear to use the quality as another would. What strikes one from the first is her frankness, her exquisite openness. She seems to speak to you from her heart, to conceal nothing. Of course it may very well be that there is nothing to conceal, that her life is on the surface, that she displays at once the whole of a being which has no complexity. Still, I do not rate her so poorly. Though she is anything but intellectual, her mind has delicacy and activity; her judgments of people are probably not wide of the mark. Then her tenderness, she shows it in every glance; and her bright, free gladness. A woman to the tips of her fingers, a womanly woman—everything that Miss Warren, for instance, is not. In fact, the latter's presence throws Mrs. Clarendon's womanliness into relief. Mrs. Clarendon will henceforth be to me the type of perfectly sweet womanhood.

"Of course, her interest in me is a mere freak. She is at a loss for entertainment now

and then at Knightswell—for, alas ! she does not read—and the discovery of a curious creature like myself is a source of amusement. I do not flatter myself that anything like friendship between us is possible ; social distance would hinder that, if nothing else. She was kind in her manner, kinder than I can at all convey to you, and, I am sure, with complete sincerity ; it is her nature to let her light shine on all, to be sweet and gracious to every one with whom she comes in contact. If, indeed, I thought friendship were attainable, I would pursue it as the main end of my existence. Her presence refreshes me, her talk is like the ripple of cool waters, her smile makes its healing way to all the hidden wounds of my wretched being. But I dare not hope for more than she gives to hundreds of others, calling them friends. She will exhaust my novelty, she will find my talk wearisome—great heavens ! is it worse than that she listens to in her drawing-room in London ?—she will pass on her way and leave me with a memory as of a cool, delicious summer day.

“ Why should she enjoy life as she does ? Why is there given to her this calm, this happy grace, the freedom from apprehension, regret, desire ? I have written thus praisingly of her, and yet I could unpack my heart of a whole

burden of fierce, and injurious, and reproachful words when I compare her existence with mine. Could not I, too, be gently gracious to all and sundry if I had wherewith to keep my soul from the bitterness of hunger ? How easy to cultivate a charm of manner when every need is so waited upon with fruition ! How easy to be sweetly placid when nature has spared you the abiding of a furious passion in your heart of hearts ! I shall see as little of her as may be. She breaks my sleepy habit, and reminds me of things I want to forget.

“ . . . Oh ! I am weary of this solitude, this daily sameness of empty life. My books are no comfort ; I can no longer interest myself in what is really so precious to me ; the chiming of sweet words is a burden to my ear. I have no will ; mere whims make a plaything of me. When I have dragged my chain to the limit of the day, I lie down in miserable anticipation of what waits me on the morrow, whether I shall rise to an hour or two of resigned quiet, or in dull wretchedness, which makes me curse the return of the sun ; the fate which tortures me will choose. If I had but something to distract my thoughts ! What I would give for the feeblest novel in red or blue back which lies to-day on the library counter, smelling sweet from the press. Anything, so

that it were new, so that it spoke to me of men and women who are at this moment looking into the eyes of destiny, even as I am. Those old writers, who have so long ago solved the problem and gone to their rest, burden me with their unconscious gravity ; their time-tested wisdom goads me to peevishness. What to them the present anguish which makes my life a disease ? Nay, what to any one, what to you, long-enduring friend, who go your way to join hands with the immortals ? ”

The other letter, written on the same day, is to his sister, Mrs. Jalland.

“ I suffer in your distress, dear Mary, and would that I could do more to help you. We have drifted so far from each other that it is difficult for me to try to comfort you with words ; to my own ear they sound inefficient, and to you they would come much like mockery. In truth, no one of us poor mortals has it in his power to heal another’s wounds ; in our suffering we can only look forward to the end of all things.

“ I cannot grieve with you at your husband’s ill-health, that you know ; but neither shall I speak words of him that would pain you. I hold no man responsible for his deeds in this world ; we all act and refrain from acting as

fate will have it, and to rail against fate will not, I fear, avail us much. It's good, however, that the children are well and happy ; they, I doubt not, are often a solace to you. I suppose they are much grown and changed since I saw them. Do not grieve, dear sister, that you are unable to give them the kind of education you would desire. Of no greater unkindness can parents be guilty than to train as if for a life of leisure children whose lot will inevitably be to earn a livelihood by day-long toil. It is to sow in them the seeds of despair. Do not heed the folly of those who say that culture is always a blessing ; the truth is that, save under circumstances favourable to its enjoyment and extension, it is an unmitigated curse: Had I children, I would have them taught just enough to aid them in such craft or trade as a man without means could put them to. It is no reason for lament that you have not books to put into their hands, rather be glad that they are thus saved from drinking of a well which for them would be poisoned. I give you this counsel in saddest sincerity. What seems to you now cruelty, will hereafter prove to have been the best.

"And now for the only way in which I can aid you. I have written to R——, asking him to sell for me, as soon as possible, a certain

number of my shares, and this money I will gladly send you as soon as it is in my hands. I suppose it is necessary to speak of the matter to your husband, though I wish that could be avoided. It will help you out of immediate embarrassments, and leave you at peace for a little while. But——well, why should I hesitate to tell you frankly, Mary? I shall henceforth have an income of something less than sixty pounds a year. I do not mean that this involves hardship; for me, nothing of the kind. But I do not well see how I can draw further upon the principal and still be able to live. It is less probable than ever that I shall find a way of earning my own living, unless I bring myself to the point of abandoning civilisation, and going to work with my hands in some other part of the world. I have no doubt that would be the very best thing for me, the gulf once crossed. Yet it would be a hard thing to leave you alone, struggling in that inferno; in truth, I could not bring myself to do that. Imagine you left with your children, and not a friend to turn to! Poor girl! that would be more than I could bear to think of.

“I write to the address you have given me. Do you fear to receive my letters at home?”

CHAPTER X.

THE rectory was at all times open to Kingcote. Mr. Vissian welcomed him as the only man within reach who could talk on congenial topics ; Mrs. Vissian liked him personally, and for the sake of the romantic stories which she wove about him in her imagination. To Percy Vissian he had become an object of a child's affectionate regard, as well as of the reverence which attaches to men of mystery. Percy not infrequently made his way to the cottage, but never outlived that fairy-tale sensation with which he had first crossed its threshold. That Kingcote lived here absolutely alone, that he passed nights in the dread solitude of this ivy-wrapped cell, that he had nothing to do but to read the books which contained such deep and wondrous things, invested him in the child's eyes with something of the unearthliness of a wizard. Anything but a youngster of boisterous instincts, Percy moved about in the cottage

with the gravest gait ; as he never went up the dim, narrow staircase, there still remained a portion of the abode of which his fancy was free to make what it would, and it often seemed to him that a strange light footfall came to his ears from the floor above. He would not have ventured to ask about this, which in truth was only the product of his excited imagination. When he had tea with his friend everything tasted to him quite differently from the flavours of home ; the mere bread became cake—he munched dry pieces with a strange relish, and the milk did not come from ordinary cows. But his great delight was when, after such a meal, he settled himself on his uncomfortable chair and saw Kingcote preparing to read to him. Often the reading was of English poetry, and that was enjoyable ; but better still was when the wizard took down one of those books of which the mere character suggested magic lore—a German book, and, turning it into free English, read a tale of Tieck, or Musäus, or Grimm, or Bechstein, or Hauff. Then did the child's face glow with attention, his features become elf-like with the stirring of phantasy ; and, when Kingcote ceased, he would move with a deep sigh and peer curiously about the room. He would beg to be allowed to look at these volumes for himself, touching the pages

with delicate finger, spelling here and there a word and asking its meaning. There was a book of German ballads, plentifully illustrated, and over these pictures the boy was never tired of musing. Percy Vissian owed not a little to his friend for these afternoons at Wood End.

With the elder people Kingcote's intimacy was not one of unrestrained confidence, though it only fell short of it by that degree which marks the superficiality of most friendships. For instance, he never felt tempted to speak to Mrs. Vissian, even after months of familiar intercourse, as he had spoken to Isabel Clarendon in their first conversation. The bright little woman did not exercise a compelling power upon his inner self, as Isabel had already done. There was much mutual kindness between them, and, it might be, as nearly a genuine friendship as is possible between man and woman; for such association gains in completeness only at the loss of the characteristics which justify it for friendship's name. Mrs. Vissian showed this supreme wisdom, of never offering sympathy. It was by no means always with a conventionally smooth face that Kingcote came into her presence; at times he sat in her parlour, a picture of wretchedness, and scarcely answered

when she spoke to him. For to Kingcote there came more of misery than of consolation from the aspect of this gentle peaceful home ; often enough he was stirred to bitterness by the sight of this perfect content, this ideal domesticity, this sweet assuagement of the evils of life ; the contrast with his own position was not fruitful of soothing. When he sat with her in that state of mind Mrs. Vissian seemed not to perceive it, or at most uttered a light word about low spirits. Of course she thought a good deal about it, but the blessed wisdom of content was strong in her, and not even by a look did she display special interest.

Mr. Vissian himself was amusing. His bibliomania and kindred interests never for an instant lost their hold upon him. When Kingcote once asked whether he did not at times weary of such things, the rector stared in amazement. The study was not the only room in which precious books were stored ; upstairs was a chamber packed almost solidly with volumes, old and new. Mr. Vissian boasted that he knew every book in the mass, and could at any time make his way to any he desired to consult ; it was only a matter of excavation. One slight anxiety his collection cost him ; the upper walls of the house had begun to show rather large cracks, and it was possible that eventually the

burden of literature would bring the roof down. But that was a risk which must take its place in the ordinary count of human contingencies. The rector subscribed to a considerable number of literary societies : the "Shakspere," the "Chaucer," the "Early English Text," and others of the kind, receiving their publications and having them duly bound for a place on shelves in some commodious dwelling of the future. In the course of talk over such things, Kingcote was by chance enlightened as to the meaning of that little incident which had struck him in his very first interview with Mr. Vissian — the latter's momentary doubt, or seeming doubt, whether he could produce the money which was requested. Kingcote discovered that his friend lived in perpetual pecuniary embarrassment. Mrs. Vissian exercised control over her husband's expenditure to the point of preventing its exceeding their income, but that was all. The quarterly cheque was invariably demanded by outstanding liabilities as soon as it arrived, and unfortunately the cheque was not a very large one. It often happened that neither the rector nor his wife had half a sovereign in the world, a singular state of things in so otherwise orderly a household. In lending Kingcote that sovereign they had just then left themselves literally penniless. Fortu-

nately the cheque was due. Mrs. Vissian dreaded the arrival of a bookseller's second-hand catalogue ; whenever it was possible, she intercepted all such, and mercilessly committed them to the flames. Yet the subject never occasioned a moment's trouble between husband and wife ; Mr. Vissian pursued his course in calmness. He was working (as a volunteer, of course) for a great English dictionary, which a certain society had it in view to produce. Also, he had taken up the new ideas of textual criticism in Elizabethan literature, and spent hours in counting the syllables in each line of a scene of this or the other dramatist. Though such a placid little man, he revelled in literary horrors. It delighted him to read aloud ghastly scenes from Webster, dwelling with gusto on the forceful utterances. Withal his orthodoxy was unimpeachable, it never occurred to him to carry his criticism into Biblical spheres. To please him, Kingcote now and then attended his services ; naturally there was no further discussion on religious topics between the two.

As October drew on, and evenings began to be dark and cold, the comfort of Mr. Vissian's study and of his wife's sitting-room assuredly lost nothing in the eyes of the hermit of Wood End, yet his visits became less frequent. He presented himself, however, about

nine o'clock one night, and was received by Mrs. Vissian with the usual friendliness. The rector was expected home every moment.

It had been raining all day, and the temperature justified the first fire, which crackled merrily and made the bright little room look cheerier than ever. The table was laid for supper (the Vissians dined at one o'clock) and a pleasant odour as of toasted cheese took advantage of the door being ajar to creep insidiously about the room. Mrs. Vissian sat with her feet on a stool, mending a pair of Percy's stockings.

"You look tired," she said, as Kingcote sat in silence and watched her out of half-closed eyes.

"I am, a little. I have been walking."

"But in this dreadful rain?"

"Has it rained? I don't think I noticed it."

Mrs. Vissian regarded him for an instant with surprise, then laughed a little, and bent over her work. Her left hand and arm were thrust into the stocking, and she held her head sideways, observing the growth of her darning with a kind of artistic earnestness and pleasure. A small black cat, which had just come in licking its mouth, put its fore feet on to the

stool and looked up into its mistress's face. The fire crackled, and a sound of clattered plates came from the kitchen. Then was heard another sound, that of the rector's latch-key at the front door. Mrs. Vissian quickly put down her work, and, with a bright look, went from the room.

Kingcote gripped the arm of his chair and uttered a low moan.

"Ha, well met!" exclaimed the rector, as, after divesting himself of a wet overcoat, he entered, flicking his black trousers with his handkerchief and dubiously regarding his boots. His cheeks, as always, were aglow with health and spirits; on his whiskers gleamed drops of rain. He stood with his back to the fire, and passed his finger round between collar and neck, a habit of his which always seemed to give him ease. "I have a message for you——"

The servant entered with a tray of savoury viands. The rector broke off in his speech to regard the goods which the gods were providing; he did so with a critical, yet a satisfied, eye.

"A message for *me*?" Kingcote asked indifferently.

"Ha, yes!" Mr. Vissian had been led off into a different train of thought, it seemed.

"Mrs. Clarendon wants you to go to see her."

"Indeed!"

"Where did you meet her, dear?" Mrs. Vissian inquired, as she bundled away her work in preparation for the meal.

"She's going to sit through the night with Mrs. Stigard. I shall be surprised if the poor old woman lives till morning; ten to one I shall be sent for. Lucy," he added, as if a semi-conscious process of reflection had just come to clear issue in his mind, "that parcel for the binder is still lying upstairs. I saw it this morning with amazement; thought it had gone a week ago."

"I'll see to it, dear," replied his wife, without looking up from the bread she was cutting. "Pity it has been forgotten."

"Forgotten! And you, who never forget anything!"

Then, turning to Kingcote, he declaimed, with humorous gesture and emphasis:

"Brother Cosroe, I find myself aggrieved,
Yet insufficient to express the same,
For it requires a great and thundering speech!"

"By-the-bye," he continued, as he poured out a glass of ale from the foam-capped jug, "it's beyond all doubt that Grubb is wrong in

his calculation. He says, you remember, that the proportion of unstopt lines in the 'Two Gentlemen' is one in eleven. Now I make it one in nine decimal fifteen, and I've been over it twice with the utmost care. This is a point of considerable importance. Take that chair, Kingcote."

"Thank you," Kingcote said, "I shall not eat."

"Why not? There's pippins and cheese to come. Then, at least, as Claudius said to the chickens, drink."

Kingcote declined, in spite of much hospitable pressure, and kept his arm-chair. Mr. Vessian applying himself to his supper, talked in intervals of mastication.

"Mrs. Clarendon wishes you to call to-morrow or next day; pray do so. I can't quite make out that mistake of Grubb's; he must have calculated from an edition in which the lines are differently arranged. I shall communicate with him. Lucy, my love, I beg of you to see that those books are dispatched the first thing to-morrow; the dilatory scoundrel always keeps me waiting, and there's a 'Cursor Mundi' I want to work at."

Kingcote suddenly rose and stepped to Mrs. Vessian to bid her good night.

"Going, what?" exclaimed the rector,

turning round, with an end of his napkin in each hand. "But I wanted to ask your opinion about—— You don't look well, my dear fellow ; what is it ? "

"Nothing, nothing. I've tired myself with walking. I'll get home."

"You have an umbrella ? Then you must take one of mine. But, I tell you, you must ; it's raining like a waterspout. Shall I walk with you ? "

Kingcote had gone off into the darkness with inaudible replies.

"What is the matter with him ? " asked the rector, standing in surprise. "Is he going to be ill ? An awkward look-out in that cottage, with not a soul near."

"He was very strange when he came," Mrs. Vissian remarked. "He said he'd been walking, and yet wasn't aware that it had rained."

"Wasn't aware ? Curious fellow, Kingcote."

"Don't you think, Walter, there's something about him we don't understand—something in the circumstances of his life, I mean ? "

"A good deal. But he's a thoroughly good fellow ; I must look in at Wood End the first thing in the morning."

They resumed their seats.

"Lucy," observed the rector, "you are blooming to-night! Upon my word, every year makes you younger and more beautiful."

"What makes you think of such a thing just now?" asked the other, laughing as she shook her head.

"I don't know. I suppose half the joy of happiness comes of contrast with others' less fortunate lot."

"Oh, I don't like to think that, Walter," protested the wife rather sadly.

"Many things are true, my dear, which we don't like to think."

Lucy moved to reach something, and took the occasion to kiss her husband's forehead.

And Kingcote, plodding through the lane's mud, reached his door. The old oak-stump in front of the cottage stood like a night-fear; the copse behind, all but stripped of leaves, gave forth dismal whisperings; rain beat hard upon the roof-thatch. The tenant took the key from his pocket and entered the cold room; he could not see his hands. Without seeking any light he felt his way up the crazy stairs, and lay down to such rest as he might find.

It rained till noon of the following day, then began to clear. When a couple of hours of pale sunshine had half dried the hedges,

Kingcote set forth to walk to Knightswell. Mr. Vissian had been as good as his word in calling.

"Oh, nothing ; a headache," was the answer he received to his anxious inquiries. "I hope I wasn't more than usually ill-mannered ; pray ask Mrs. Vissian to try and tolerate me."

"You're getting a little low, it strikes me ; too much solitude. By-the-bye, you'll look in at Knightswell this afternoon ?"

"I suppose Mrs. Clarendon feels obliged to ask me ; I dare say she'd rather I kept away."

"My dear sir, these are outcomes of the black humour ; you are not yourself. Mrs. Clarendon will be very glad indeed to see you ; so she assured me. I pray you, fight against this tendency to melancholia."

It was difficult to reach the gates without having previously collected considerably more mud than one cares to convey into a lady's drawing-room. Kingcote endeavoured to remove some of this superfluous earth as he walked up the drive by rubbing his boots in the wet grass ; the result was not inspiring.

"Pooh !" he exclaimed impatiently. "If she really cares to see me, she won't regard the state of my boots ; any one who accepts such as I am, must take mud and all."

The thought appeared to amuse him, he walked on with a laugh.

As he entered the garden, he met the trap just driving away from the house. A gentleman was seated in it. He had rather the look of a man of business, and was reading a letter. He scanned Kingcote, then resumed his reading.

Disturbed with the thought that there might be other visitors in the house, Kingcote hesitated, doubted whether to go on. He made up his mind to do so, however, not without sundry fresh communings with himself of a bitter kind. On inquiry he found that Mrs. Clarendon was at home, and, after a moment in the hall, he was led to the dining-room. Mrs. Clarendon was writing letters at a table by the window; as she rose, he thought he detected annoyance on her face.

"I fear I disturb you," he said coldly.

"You don't at all; or rather, you will not, if you'll let me treat you as a friend. I have just one letter I am obliged to write; I asked the servant to bring you here, thinking you might like to look at the pictures till I have done. One or two are thought good, I believe—that Veronese, and that Ruysdael, and the Greuze yonder. May I?"

It was hard not to smile in reply to her

voice and look as she spoke the last two little words, the more so that it was clear she had something just now to trouble her quite other than the inopportune arrival of a visitor. Kingcote walked to the picture she had indicated as a Veronese, and, affecting to view it, let his eyes wander to Isabel at the writing-table. She was thinking, previous to commencing her letter. Her left arm rested on the desk, and the thumb and middle finger of the hand pressed her forehead; with the end of the penholder she tapped her chin. He noticed how beautiful was the outline of her head, relieved against the bright window; noticed, too, the grace of her neck when she bent forward to write. The scratching of her pen—she wrote very rapidly—was the only sound in the room.

Kingcote went from picture to picture, his mind not quite tuned to judge and enjoy their merits. One, however, held him. When lunching here, he had sat with his back to the wall of which this canvas was the central ornament, so had not observed it. It was a portrait of Mrs. Clarendon, painted probably at the time of her marriage, an excellent picture. As he gazed at it, Isabel came forward.

“Do you recognise it?” she asked, tapping

on one hand with the letter she held in the other.

"Without doubt."

"And moralise? But," she added quickly, "I want you to look at this child's head. Isn't it exquisitely sweet?"

His eyes wandered back to the portrait, and, on their way to the door, he again paused before it.

"Did I show you my ferns the last time you were here?" Isabel asked. "Will you walk so far?"

She led to the rear of the hall, thence, by a glass door, into a short glass-roofed passage, the door at the end of which opened into the conservatory. The first section was a small rotunda, twenty feet in diameter and twelve feet high. The floor was of unglazed tiles, the ceiling of ornamental stucco; round the wall was a broad cushioned seat, above which, commencing at a height of some four feet from the ground, were windows of richly coloured glass, pictured with leaves and flowers and fruit. A stand for plants occupied the centre, but at present the shelves were almost bare.

Mrs. Clarendon threw back one of the windows.

"There is a good view from here," she said. "A tree used to intercept it, but we had

it cut down in the spring to clear a piece of ground for tennis."

From the hill, on which the house was built, a broad stretch of green park led the eye to a considerable distance in the direction of Salcot. The roof of the cottage at Wood End was just visible. Kingcote drew attention to it.

"I don't see any smoke from the chimney," Mrs. Clarendon remarked, with a pleasant glance. "It is to be hoped you keep good fires this damp weather. Is the place rain-proof? These last two days will have tested it."

"It seems to be sound."

"And you still find it your ideal?"

"The cottage? I did not choose it as an ideal abode."

"But the quietness, the retirement, I mean. In that, at all events, you have not been disappointed."

"Certainly not."

Isabel shuddered.

"How you live there I can't understand. But I suppose you find it best for your studies."

"I don't study," returned Kingcote, rather vacantly, looking at the pictured glass of the window.

Isabel closed the window and passed to the next door.

"I am so sorry Miss Warren is not at home," she said. "I quite thought she would be, but at the last moment she decided to go to London to see something in the South Kensington Museum—oh, Schliemann's discoveries!"

"Does Miss Warren read Greek and Latin?"

"Latin she does, and is just beginning Greek. She's a wonderfully clever girl, but it's difficult to get her to talk. I am sure you will find her interesting when you have had opportunities of talking with her."

They were now in an ordinary hot-house. Isabel pointed out the plants which interested her.

"I have just had a visit from my lawyer," she said, as she plucked away some dead leaves. "What tedious people lawyers are, and so dreadfully indispensable."

"I suppose I passed him on the drive."

"No doubt. But I mustn't speak ill of the good man; he came all the way from London to save me a journey."

They moved about for a few moments in silence.

"There's nothing here to look at, really," Mrs. Clarendon said. "If I could afford it I should have the place kept in good order; but I can't."

She did not appear to notice the look of

surprise which Kingcote was for a moment unable to suppress. Leading the way back to the rotunda, she placed a loose cushion and seated herself. The warmth here was temperate, not more than the season required for comfort.

"So you don't study?" she began, with friendly abruptness, when she had pointed to a place for her companion. "What, then, do you do? I am rude, you see, but—I wish to know."

"I wish I could satisfactorily account for my days. I read a little, walk a good deal, see the Vissians now and then—"

"And cultivate *ennui*—isn't it so? A most unprofitable kind of gardening. I believe you are thoroughly miserable; in fact, you are not at much pains to hide it."

"Scarcely as much as courtesy requires, you would say. I wish I could be more amusing, Mrs. Clarendon."

"I don't ask you to be amusing—only to show yourself a little amused at my impertinent curiosity. Why should you have so forgotten the habit of cheerfulness?"

"The habit?"

"Certainly. Is it not a habit, as long as we are in health?"

"In people happily endowed, I suppose.

Temperament and circumstances may enable one to keep a bright view of life."

"Rather, a reasonable effort of the will, I should say. I am often tempted to be dreary, but I refuse to give way."

Kingcote smiled, almost laughed.

"You think I have nothing to be dreary about?" she asked, gazing at him as if trying to read his thoughts. "That is a mistake; I don't speak idly. It would be excusable enough if I lost my cheerfulness. But with me it *is* a habit. Under any circumstances there's a great deal of entertainment to be got out of life. Of course, if one puts oneself under the most unfavourable conditions—goes to live in a remote hermitage, shuts oneself from social comforts, reads doleful books about funeral urns——"

She caught his eye, and broke off with bright laughter.

"You don't care for Sir Thomas Browne?" he asked.

"I shouldn't be honest if I said I did. I am afraid that kind of reading is beyond me. Ada—Miss Warren—enjoys it; but she is intellectual, and I cannot pretend to be."

"What do you read, Mrs. Clarendon?"

"The newspapers, and now and then a novel—*voilà tout!*"

"There are better things than books," observed Kingcote.

A footstep was heard in the inner house.

"Is that you, Reuben?" the lady called, causing the gardener to put his head through the door with the admission, "It be me, ma'am."

She exchanged words with him, then proposed to Kingcote that they should go to the drawing-room for tea. On their way she paused in the hall, with talk about the panelling. Pointing to a fox's head :

"A trophy of last season. We killed, that day, a couple of fields behind Wood End."

Tea appeared in a few minutes. As Isabel poured out two cups, her guest made a feint of closely examining a framed photograph of Knightswell, which stood on the table. He was less at his ease than on the tiled floor of the conservatory; the dried mud upon his boots showed brutally against the dark carpet, disposing him to savage humorousness. He became aware that the beverage was silently held out to him. Her own cup in hand, Mrs. Clarendon reclined in her chair, and gradually her eyes fixed themselves upon him. He was conscious of the look before he returned it, and,

speaking at length, did so as if in reply to a question, though himself interrogative.

"Did you ever visit a London hospital?"

Isabel manifested no surprise; her face had even a quiet smile of satisfaction.

"Yes," she answered. "I once went to see a servant in St. Thomas's."

"Ah, I was studying there—let me see, six years ago. My father was a medical man, and determined that I should be the same. At his death I gave it up; I hadn't finished my course."

"It was not to your taste?"

"I loathed it. My bad dreams are still of hospital wards and dissecting-rooms. I cannot bear to see the word 'hospital' in print. The experience of those years has poisoned my life, as thoroughly as a slip of the lancet would have poisoned my blood."

"Had you that dislike from the commencement?" Isabel asked, after putting down her empty cup, and crossing her hands on her lap with an air of attention.

"No, not in the same degree. I thought this profession would do as well as another. I believe I even had philanthropic glows now and then, and perhaps even a period of scientific interest. The latter did not survive the steps from theory to practice; the former——"

He made a motion with his hand, and smiled.

"The very last thing I should ever have associated with you," remarked Isabel, with puzzled thoughtfulness.

"A philanthropic zeal?"

"I didn't mean that, but I am not sure that I mayn't include it. Please go on."

Kingcote was resting his forehead on his palm; he resumed without raising his eyes.

"My father practised at Norwich—by-the-bye, our friend, Sir Thomas Browne's city. When he died, I went to live with my mother for a while; my sister had just married and gone to London, and a sister of my father's shared our house. I thought of all sorts of things—law, literature (of course), even commerce. For I had a small capital—some shares in a joint-stock bank; they gave me a sufficient income, and I could realise when I needed. For a year I made plans; then of a sudden I found myself in Paris. You know the Continent?"

"I was in the Riviera for a month, some years ago," Isabel answered, without interest.
"I can't afford to go abroad now."

It was the second time she had used this phrase. Kingcote watched her countenance.

"What took you to Paris?" she inquired, ignoring the diversion.

"Nothing. I was turning over an old Bradshaw, and details of the journey caught my eye. Next morning I left Norwich. I was abroad two years."

"In France all the time?"

"No. France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy. Perhaps I saw the countries all the better for the necessity I was under of travelling very cheaply—so cheaply, indeed, I wonder how I did it. I walked oftener than rode, and dispensed with hotel dinners whenever possible. I have a diary of the two years' travel."

"You will let me read that?" Isabel asked quietly.

He hesitated; his eyes fixed absently on the windows.

"Yes, I will let you read it. It is foolish, boyish; I dare not read it myself."

"For what reason?"

"Because there is nothing I hold more in horror than the ghost of my former self. I deny identity," he added with sudden bitterness. "How can one be held responsible for the thoughts and acts of the being who bore his name years ago? The past is no part of our existing self; we are free of it, it is buried."

That release is the pay Time owes us for doing his work."

Isabel regarded him earnestly; her cheek gathered a warmer hue for a moment.

"You may read it if you care to," he resumed, falling back to calmness. "There is no one else to whom I would show it."

Isabel waited for him to continue. He sat, bent forward, his hands about one knee.

"And you returned to England with plans?" she asked at length, finding him persevere in silence.

"No, only with experience. I came back because I had news of my mother's illness. She was dead and buried before I got home."

"It strikes me as curious," he resumed rapidly, "that my childhood, boyhood in fact, has utterly gone from my memory. I suppose that is why I have such slight sympathy with children. I have often tried desperately to recover the consciousness of my young days: it has gone. My father, my mother, I cannot recall their relations to me, nor mine to them. Nay, facts even have left my memory. I know scarcely anything before the beginning of my student years, and even those are vanishing, I find. I live only in the present."

"But the future?"

"No, from looking forward I shrink as much as from looking back."

There was another silence.

"But since you returned to England?" Isabel inquired, "have you never thought of another profession?"

Kingcote laughed.

"I had crazy projects for studying art. Gabriel put that into my head. But my zeal did not last. It is the same in everything; I lack persistence."

"And you have——"

"Done nothing, you would say," Kingcote supplied in the pause she made. "Literally nothing; wasted my time, lost my best years. The necessary consequence of being made up of *wants*, without the powers which could satisfy them. At present I am engaged in the first work I have done for years."

"At last, then!" Isabel exclaimed.

"Yes, the work of resigning myself to being nothing, of casting off the last foolish flattery of self-conceit, of resolutely bidding myself understand that fate will bear any amount of idle fuming and remain unchanged. It is a task which has its difficulties; rather harder, on the whole, than the realisation of death. Did you ever force yourself to realise

death, not to admit it in idle words, but to——”

Isabel motioned him to silence; her face was darkened with a look of pain, of fear.

“Forgive me,” he said in a lower voice; “to me it is such a familiar thought. I talk so seldom that I forget the difference between reflection and conversation.”

She spent a moment in clearing her mind of the disturbing thought—it seemed strangely disturbing, and at length banished it with the laugh occasioned by a new idea.

“I wonder,” she said, changing her attitude, “what you——”

“You were going to say——?”

“You spoke of having thought of commerce. Suppose you had become a man of business, and had made your fortune, what would your views of life be?”

“Who can say? To begin with, I should only have ruined myself; no fortune would ever have come in that way. Conceiving that it had, why I should not be the same person that I am. Circumstances are the mould which give shape to such metal as we happen to be made of. The metal is the same always, but it may be cast for mean or for noble uses.”

"I do not think," Isabel said with gentle reassurance, "that Fate uses the nobler metals for mean service; it has abundance of the poorer stuff at hand."

"That is very well said; if I dared apply it to myself I might yet live awhile in the old fool's paradise. But there is one gain which saves my past years from utter vanity—I have learnt to know myself."

"Have you?"

Kingcote smiled.

"You say that sadly. Yes, you are quite right. Self-knowledge, in my case, is equivalent to disillusion, loss of hope."

"I meant nothing of the kind," she rejoined, after reflecting a moment on the intention of his words, which she had not at first quite caught. "I doubt whether you do know yourself. If you did, you would have more confidence."

"That is the kindness natural to you. But," he added, softening the words by his tone, "you do not know me."

"No—not yet. It is not easy to know you. I cannot judge you by other people."

Kingcote rose and walked to the fireplace; Mrs. Clarendon watched him, but kept her seat.

"You know many people," he said, speak-

ing with his peculiar abruptness, which was quite different from the tone of mere familiarity, seemed indeed rather to accentuate the distance between them.

"Many," Isabel returned, "in a way."

"It must be strange to have so many acquaintances. It gives you the sense of belonging to the world; you do not stand on the outside and look on."

"In a theatre—watching from an uncomfortable back seat? The stage is open to you."

"And the parts? Even if I were cast, think of my poor memory. The words are so hard, so artificial. At most I could play the walking gentleman, and in truth I have no mind for that."

Isabel smiled, as if involuntarily, and, after glancing round the room, quitted her seat.

"A friend is coming in a day or two to stay with me," she said; "not a mere acquaintance, but really a friend. I should like you to meet her: you won't refuse?"

He looked at her and hesitated.

"You can't help liking Mrs. Stratton. She has been my nearest friend for years."

"I may be gone," Kingcote said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Gone? But you have no intention of leaving?"

"Yes, a half-intention."

"To return to London?"

"I suppose so."

She kept silence, and he added:

"My sister's husband is ill. Circumstances might compel me to return."

"But you are not summoned? You won't leave your cottage unless there is a necessity?"

"Perhaps not; yet I can't be sure. I act very much on impulse."

"That phrase reminds me of some one—a very foolish young man, whom you don't at all resemble."

"Some one you know?"

"One of the many; never mind him. But you will not be gone before next Wednesday; that we may take for granted; unless, of course, you have bad news. You will come and lunch with us on Wednesday?"

"With yourself and Mrs. Stratton?"

"And Miss Warren. I want you to know her better."

"Yes, I will come, if I am still at Wood End."

He held his hand to take leave. Isabel retained it as she spoke.

"In any case you will not go without coming to say good-bye?"

"I could not easily do that, Mrs. Clarendon."

She went with him into the hall, and, when he had left the house, watched him from the drawing-room windows till the trees intervened.

CHAPTER XI.

To Mr. Vincent Lacour, issuing from the precincts of the South Kensington Museum, and about to walk towards the railway station, came the vision of a face that he knew, borne past him in a hansom cab, which in a moment stopped. It was raining slightly. Lacour used his umbrella for self-concealment, and, at the same time, contrived to watch his acquaintance descending from the vehicle. She (it was a lady) handed up her fare and passed into the Museum.

The young man invoked aloud the divinity of Jingo.

"A minute later," he continued to himself, "and we should have come face to face with her. A chance meeting, of course; why shouldn't people have met by chance? But I'm glad she didn't see us together."

A miserable, drizzly day; the sky and earth a uniform mud colour. Lacour watched his

boots degenerating. He consulted his watch ; it was half an hour past noon. An engagement to lunch with a friend at one stood before him ; he disregarded it, and went in pursuit of the lady.

"Come to see Hecuba's kitchen-pots, no doubt," he mused. "Yes, there she is ! She has a good figure, seen from behind, and she always dresses well. I wonder what countenance she will show me ; there's no foreseeing."

Ada Warren happened to raise her eyes, and beheld Lacour approaching, a smile of frank surprise on his handsome face. She was startled, and could not help showing it. Lacour, on the other hand, was very much at his ease, talked in a lightly facetious way of the antiquities in the case before them, now and then putting in a personal question.

"You are in town ?" he asked by parenthesis.

"I am, for one day."

"I hope Mrs. Clarendon is well ? Turning her thoughts, no doubt, to fox-hunting. You don't hunt, I believe ? No more do I. Fortunate I haven't the taste, isn't it ?"

Ada made no reply, continuing her inspection of the contents of the case, or appearing to do so. He moved a little away, as if to examine other cases, but was presently at her

side again. Her curiosity seemed to be satisfied, and she let her eyes wander rather vaguely.

"Do you often come here?" she asked, as they passed from a little group of people to an uninvaded spot a few yards away. She spoke as though against her will, merely to escape from embarrassment.

"No, indeed; I am here by the merest chance, but a most happy one. I haven't much time as a rule. The weather drove me out to-day. Are you sensitive to the weather? A sky like this weighs upon me; I haven't a thought; I can't follow an argument through three successive lines. You know I'm reading law?"

"I rather thought you had left England."

He looked at her, raised his eyebrows slightly, and shook his head.

"You don't mean that you wish I had?"

"Why should I wish it?"

"I am used to that feeling in my acquaintances; they exhaust their powers of indirect emphasis in conveying to me the fact that I am *de trop*. It is refreshing to find one exception, and the one I should have desired."

Whilst speaking he took out a pocket-book, which contained loose papers; one of these he

removed ; but only to return it to his pocket together with the book.

"Do I bore you ?" he asked, bending his head down to her with graceful expectation of her reply ; "or will you let me walk on with you ?"

"Is there anything you wish particularly to see ?" Ada returned, still in the same mechanical way.

"Yes ; I should like you to come upstairs to the pictures. You really understand art ; you can help me to appreciate the right things."

She walked on without hesitation, and they spent nearly an hour in the galleries. It was as though, in consenting to accompany him, Ada had overcome an inward restraint, and was now expanding in a sense of freedom. Her face cleared, her eyes grew bright, her tongue was loosened ; she talked of the pictures in a natural, easy, and sensible way, quite without self-consciousness. Lacour was, as always, frankly egoistic ; everything became to him a text for effusive utterance on his subjective experiences. As on a previous occasion, he spoke of the artistic instincts which made the basis of his nature, and went on to sketch a plan of æsthetic education, such as he hoped some day to

carry into effect. The unction of his self-flattery was irresistible ; to listen was to become insensibly as interested in him as he was in himself. The mere quality of his voice was insinuating, seductive and delicately sensual, and the necessity of speaking low when strangers were at hand gave him the advantage of intimate notes and cadences. His faculty for making himself and his circumstances a source of pathetic suggestion did in fact almost amount to artistic genius ; there was at times a fall in his voice which caressed the ear like certain happiest phrases in sad, simple music, and his eyes would fix themselves on a beautiful picture with an apprehension of melancholy so remote, so subtle, that to perceive its reflection was to feel a thrill on the finest chords of sympathy. Then a lighter mood would succeed, comment would take a humorous turn, not without hints of interpretation generally reserved for masculine colloquy, ambiguities which might or might not be intentional, a glancing in directions whence it is usual to avert the mental eye. At the end of the hour Ada was laughing and talking in a way quite new to her, doing her best to say clever things which yet had no point of sarcasm, even speaking a little of herself, though this was a subject upon which Lacour could not get her to dwell.

"It's a quarter to two," he exclaimed at length. "Are you not hungry?"

"I meant to lunch here; perhaps it is time."

"In that case we'll lunch together—if you permit it?"

They did so in complete good-fellowship, the only difficulty arising when Lacour desired to pay for both. Ada opposed this, and in a manner which proved her in earnest.

"You return to-night?" he asked, leaning towards her on the table when the waiter's demands had been severally met.

"To-morrow morning. I stay with friends."

"At the Meres'?" he asked quickly.

"Yes."

He fingered a bottle in the cruet-stand, his lips slightly drawn together.

"You do not know them intimately?" Ada asked, observing him.

He shook his head.

"No; they would not be interested in hearing that it was I who spoilt your purposes of study."

Ada did not reply to this, save by a slight change of countenance. Before he spoke again she saw him take an envelope from the inner pocket of his coat.

"I have something here which belongs to

you," he said, "though it is not addressed. It was written a week ago, but for one or two reasons I delayed putting it in the post. Will you let me be my own postman?"

Ada had just drawn on her second glove, and was preparing to rise. She set her face in hard outlines and remained motionless, her hands on her lap.

"Won't you save me a penny?" Lacour pleaded with gravity. "Economy is essential with me; I have not concealed the fact."

Ada's lips quivered to a smile; 'she took the letter from where it lay on the table, and moved away without facing him. There was colour on her cheeks.

"Are you going straight to your friends?" Lacour inquired, with some difficulty coming up to her side.

"No; I have some purchases to make. I shall take a cab."

"I will get you one."

With every politeness of manner he led her from the door to the vehicle, saw her comfortably seated, gave the driver his orders, and took a silent leave. The envelope was crushed in her hand as she drove away.

Not many days later Mrs. Stratton arrived at Knightswell, bringing her youngest boy, a

ten-year-old, whose absence from school was explained by recent measles. This lady was the wife of an officer at present with his regiment in Africa ; her regret at the colonel's remoteness, and her anxiety on his behalf in a time of savage warfare, were tempered by that spirit of pride in things military which so strongly infuses a certain type of the British matron, destined to bring forth barbarians and heroes. At the age of forty Mrs. Stratton had four children, all boys ; the two eldest were already at Woolwich and Sandhurst respectively, the third at Harrow, extracting such strategic science as Thucydides could supply, boastful of a name traceable in army lists three generations back. These four lads were offspring whereof no British matron could feel ashamed : perfect in physical development, striking straight from the shoulder, with skulls to resist a tomahawk, red-cheeked and hammer-fisted. In the nursery they had fought each other to the tapping of noses ; at school they fought all and sundry up through every grade of pugilistic championship. From infancy they handled the fowling-piece, and killed with the coolness of hereditary talent. Side by side they walked in quick step, as to the beating of a drum ; eyes direct, as looking along a barrel ; ears pricked for the millionth echo of an offensive remark.

At cricket they drove cannon-balls ; milder games were the target of their scorn. Admirable British youths !

"How *can* they make such a milk-sop of that child!" Mrs. Stratton exclaimed when she had renewed her acquaintance with Percy Vissian, summoned to "play with" Master Edgar Strangeways Stratton, and showing no great appreciation of the privilege.

"Percy's tastes are very quiet," Mrs. Clarendon explained. "He likes reading more than anything else."

"What does he read? I'll examine him. Come here, Percy?" she called; the two ladies were on the lawn, and the boys at a little distance.

Percy looked round and prepared to walk towards Mrs. Stratton, but the other boy suddenly caught his two arms, pinned them behind his back, and ran him violently over the grass.

"Gently, Edgar, gently," said his mother, smiling reproof. Little Percy stood red and flustered, ashamed at a personal indignity, as children with brains are wont to be.

"Percy," interrogated Mrs. Stratton, "when was the battle of Inkerman fought?"

The lad shook his head, regarding Mrs. Clarendon appealingly.

"Don't be ashamed, Percy," said the latter, holding to him her hand. "I'm sure *I* couldn't say."

"You couldn't? Ah-yah!" shrieked Edgar Stratton, flinging up his cap and leaping to catch it. He was a fat, bullet-headed boy, generally red as a boiled lobster, supple as an eel.

"Well, you tell us," ventured Percy, emboldened by the grasp of Isabel's hand.

"Think I can't, you silly?—Fifth of November, 1854; began at seven o'clock in the morning. For three hours eight thousand British infantry supported the attack of forty thousand muffs of Russians. Wish I'd been there, don't I just! Four English generals were killed and four wounded."

"He knows all the battles like that," remarked his mother with pride.

She was a short, dark woman, growing rather stout, and with no very graceful walk; her face was attractive, and constantly wore a smile; she dressed with extreme elegance. In converse she displayed a heartiness and independence which were a little too masculine; her hand-clasp was a direct invitation to free companionship, and her manner suggested a rejection of soft treatment on the score of her sex. The military gentlemen with whom she

associated spoke of her “pluck”; she was capable, they said, of leading a charge of cavalry; and indeed to see her in the hunting-field was to realise in a measure the possibility. Fearlessness is generally equivalent to lack of imagination, and in Mrs. Stratton’s case the connection was clearly established, but on this very account she was admirable in the discharge of many distinctly feminine duties. In an accident, a sudden calamity, her steadiness of nerve was only matched by the gentleness and efficiency of her ministering zeal. In her nature the maternal element was all-absorbing; to produce and rear fine animals of her species, to defend them if need be with the courage of a tigress, to extend her motherly protection and pride to those she deemed worthy, these were her offices. No man approached her with thoughts of gallantry for all her comeliness, and certainly she thought of no man more warmly than as a jolly good fellow and a boon companion, her husband being at the head of such. The latter’s absence was no harder to bear than that of any valued friend; had she not her boys? These youngsters she would treat with the demonstrative affectionateness which is a proof of incapacity for deeper emotions. She was all instinct, and as intolerant of alien forms of thought and feeling

as even an Englishwoman can attain to be. Fortunately the sphere of her indifference was immense ; with wider knowledge her lack of charity would have been far more unpleasantly obvious. As it was, she never made a statement which fell short of finality ; argued with, pressed to reconsider, she would put the matter aside with a smile and pass on to a new subject —the maternal does not reason.

Between her and Isabel undoubtedly existed a strong mutual attachment. Whereon this was based could not at first sight be determined ; the two appeared different in most things. Possibly it was one of those cases which occur, of attraction to and by qualities, which, owing to circumstances, remain potential. Had Isabel's marriage resulted in offspring, she might have developed maternal passion in no less a degree than her friend ; the sweet and lovable nature, which now exercised such a universal charm in virtue of its wide activity, might very well have concentrated itself on those few objects, with an intensity detrimental to the broader influences of her womanhood. The story of her relations with Ada Warren, viewed aright, perhaps tells in favour of this idea. She could not herself have explained to you her affection for Mrs. Stratton, and he who is giving these chapters

of her history may not pretend to do much more than exhibit facts and draw at times a justifiable inference. He is not a creator of human beings, with eyes to behold the very heart of the machine he has himself pieced together ; merely one who takes trouble to trace certain lines of human experience, and, working here on grounds of knowledge, thereby aid of analogy, here again in the way of bolder speculation, spins his tale with what skill he may till the threads are used up.

Ada, as one would have anticipated, thoroughly disliked Mrs. Stratton, and avoided intercourse with her as much as possible. When the lady was at Knightswell, Ada would frequently keep apart for a whole day ; even in the visitor's presence she could not feign friendliness. Mrs. Stratton's manner to her was one of genial indifference, with no suggestion that she felt herself slighted.

"I see no change," said Isabel's friend, the day after her arrival, knowing, of course, of the enlightenment which had come to the girl.
"She seems to me exactly the same."

"She is not," returned Isabel. "Her life is twice as intense and varied. She is happy, or nearly so, and conceals it to spare me."

"H'm ; you think her capable of that ?"
"Quite."

"By-the-bye, does she correspond with young Lacour, do you think?"

"I fancy not. I believe she would tell me."

"You have astonishing faith in her uprightness."

"She is a strange girl, but she is honourable," affirmed Mrs. Clarendon.

Isabel was not wrong as to the change in Ada. Outwardly there was not much evidence of the processes at work in the hidden places of her being, yet sufficient to prove to just observation whither they tended. Formerly Ada had kept to herself to hide her misery, had striven in solitude with passions which left their mark upon her face when she reappeared, had been worn with listlessness, when not overtaxing her strength to escape the torments which assailed her leisure. Now, she was seldom actively employed, yet solitude was precious to her; Isabel saw her pacing up and down the garden paths, no longer with dark and troubled face, but with the light of earnest preoccupation in her eyes, and a clear brow, which was often raised as if at the impulse of intense feeling. There was more of healthful girlishness in her motions, her smile; she would spring and catch a bough swaying above her, would run a space with the big house-dog

bounding beside her. Once she came in at the front door with her breath gone, her cheeks in high colour, her hat in her hand ; Isabel met her in the hall, and in surprise asked her what was the matter.

"A race with the rain!" Ada panted, sinking on a chair. "I could see it coming, nearer every second ; I got in as the first drop fell!"

She showed a childish delight in her achievement ; perhaps she enjoyed the sense of her health and strength, scarcely ever tried in active exercise. After this, running with the big dog became a daily pastime. Young Stratton caught a glimpse of her at it in the park one day, and rushed to join the sport.

"After a rabbit, eh?" he shouted, coming up with them.

Ada at once dropped to a walk, and spoke to the dog, instead of answering the boy's question.

"I say, you look here!" Edgar suddenly exclaimed in a whisper.

She turned, and saw him aiming with a catapult at a bird perched on a bush hard by. Before the aim was perfect, Ada had snatched the tool from his hands.

"Well, I call that ——" cried the youngster,

at a loss for words. "What do you want to spoil my shot for?"

"Can't you amuse yourself without murdering!" returned the girl, hot in anger. "Shoot at that tree-trunk if you must shoot."

"Murdering!" echoed the youth, in blank astonishment. "Come now, Miss Warren! Murdering a bird—I call that good!"

"What else is it? What right have you to rob the bird of its life? What is it that drives you to kill every creature that you safely may?"

"It's fair sport!" urged the young Briton, in amaze at this outlandish mode of regarding things.

"Sport?"

She stood regarding him, the catapult still in her hand.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?"

"What am I going to be? A soldier, of course."

"I thought so; then you can murder on a large scale."

"You call killing the enemy in battle, murder?"

"What do you call it? Fair sport?"

"I say, Miss Warren, you're a rum 'un, you are!" observed Edgar, shaking his round head

in wonder. “Are you joking?—though you don’t look like it.”

Ada held the catapult out to him.

“Here, take it and run off,” she said, shortly.

He obeyed, and brought down a blackbird not fifty yards away, then ran to Mrs. Clarendon and his mother, who laughed at the story. The ladies’ ideas of sport did not greatly differ; were not the fowls of the air, the fishes of the deep and the foxes of the field created for the British sportsman? Surely no piece of teleology was clearer.

Ada had no one whom she could take into her confidence, no soul to which she could speak out the sincerity of her own. With Rhoda Meres she exchanged letters at long intervals, but the thoughts they expressed to each other were only from the surface of their lives; the girls were friends only in the slightest sense of the word. It was true that she had in her possession just now a letter from another correspondent, awaiting an answer; that reply she could not bring herself to write; and, when she did so, the words would not be those it was in her to say. Her isolation was absolute. Whatsoever force of waters beat against the flood-gates of her heart, she could not give them free passage.

She was driven to commune with herself in set speech ; by degrees, to take her pen and write the words she would have uttered had any ear been bent to her. She resumed her habit of spending the mornings in the library, but no longer with books ; either she sat in reverie, or, at her desk, filled sheet after sheet with small, nervous handwriting, her features fixed in eager interest, her whole body knit as if in exertion, in sympathy with the effort of her mind. When she came forth to meet the other inmates of the house, she did not speak, but looked quietly cheerful.

She had been thus occupied through the morning of the day on which Kingcote was expected to appear at luncheon. Entering the drawing-room shortly after the first bell rang, she found no one there ; a moment later a servant opened the door and announced the visitor.

As they exchanged such phrases as the situation gave rise to, Kingcote found himself reflecting on the familiar fact that our first impression of a face is greatly modified by acquaintance. The girl's features no longer appeared to him irredeemably plain, though their variance from types of smooth comeliness was obvious enough. In profile it was a very harsh visage, the nose irregular, the chin too prominent, the cheek-bone high, the

ear seemingly too far back on the head; viewed in full, details were lost in the general expression of force and passionate life. The jaw was heavy, the lips large, yet these not ill-shaped, the contrary rather; but all the upper part bore the stamp of character and intelligence. The deep eyes had no unkindly light, and readily answered to a humorous suggestion. Perhaps it was the hint of hard endurance which struck an observer first of all, and left him with the idea of a sullen, resentful face; for her brows had a way of nervously wrinkling up between the eyes, and her lips of making themselves yet fuller by compression at the corners. Her gaze was not one of open friendliness, but Kingcote was beginning to discover something in its reserve quite different from mere irresponsible egoism. Her forehead, taken apart with its weight of dark hair, might have been modelled for Pallas.

But whilst justice was thus being done, Mrs. Clarendon entered, sweet, smiling, irresistible from the first glance, and was followed by Mrs. Stratton. When all proceeded to the dining-room, Master Edgar was found already in possession, seated at table, waiting with impatience. Meals were with him a matter of supreme importance; he ate his

way stolidly and steadily through all courses, scorning the idleness of conversation.

There was much talk between the two elder ladies of a meet on the following day ; both proposed joining the field, Mrs. Stratton having brought horses of her own with that view. Edgar had his pony, and would follow the hunt in his own fashion.

"Where is the meet ?" Kingcote inquired.

"At Salcot," replied Isabel. "Do let us drive you over. Don't look so scornful, Ada ; I'm sure Mr. Kingcote would enjoy it."

"I think it very likely," the girl remarked quietly.

"Your judgment on us, one and all," laughed Mrs. Stratton.

"Miss Warren calls it murder," cried Edgar derisively, with his mouth full.

Kingcote gave his assent to the proposal that he should drive with the ladies and witness the meet. They promised to take him up at the junction of the old and the new roads.

He talked with Mrs. Stratton in the drawing-room after luncheon. Edgar came and reclined on the carpet, resting his head against his mother.

"Get up, sir!" Mrs. Stratton addressed him. "I won't have this laziness after meals. Look at him, Mr. Kingcote ; don't you think

it high time he was packed off to school again?"

"Well, I shan't be sorry," observed the youth, reluctantly rising to his feet.

"I suppose you are eager to get back to cricket?" said Kingcote.

"Cricket! Why, you don't play cricket this time of year!" cried Edgar, with scornful laughter.

"Indeed? What is the game, then? Football?"

"I should think so."

"You must mend your manners, Edgar," observed his mother. "Now run out into the garden, and don't trouble us. His body is getting rather too much for him," she continued playfully to Kingcote. "He must get back to his fagging. I wouldn't for the world send a boy of mine to a school where there was no fagging."

"Capital thing, no doubt," said Kingcote. "He's a fine boy."

"A little too noisy just at present."

"Oh, it's a sign of his perfect health. Surely you wouldn't see him mooning about, or shutting himself up with books?"

"Like that poor little fellow of the rector's," said Mrs. Stratton. "That child ought to be sent off to school."

"Certainly. They'd soon knock him into shape, take the dreaminess out of him. Robust health before everything. Are your other boys as hearty as this one?"

"Oh, every bit! My eldest lad has broken almost every bone in his body, and seems all the better for it."

"Why, that's magnificent! Their lives will be a joy to them. Constitution, of course, is much; but I'm sure they have to thank you for an admirable bringing-up."

Ada, who sat close by, was regarding Kingcote curiously, just suppressing a smile as she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Stratton's gratified face.

"This is your ideal of education?" she put in gravely.

"Assuredly it is," was Kingcote's answer. "Surely that education is best which leads to happiness. That boy will never be afflicted with nervous disorders; he will never be melancholy, hypochondriacal, despairing; he will never see the world in any but the rosiest light, never be troubled by abstract speculation, never doubt for a moment about his place and his work. The plan of education which has such a result as that is beneficence itself. Don't you think so, Miss Warren?"

"To be sure I wouldn't have the minds

altogether neglected," said Mrs. Stratton. "Come and listen, Isabel; Mr. Kingcote is saying the most interesting things."

"Let the mind take care of itself," continued Kingcote, smiling slightly as he looked at Mrs. Clarendon. "If a boy has a bent for acquiring knowledge, he will manage that later. I wouldn't encourage it. Make him a sound creature, that's the first thing. Occupy him with vigorous bodily pursuits; keep his mind from turning inwards; save him from reflection. If every boy in England could be so brought up, they would be a blissful generation."

"How about the girls?" questioned Isabel. "Would you educate them in the same way?"

"Precisely, with yet more wholesome effect. Nay, I would go further; they should never open a book till they were one-and-twenty, and their previous training should be that of Amazons."

"That is a merciful provision," said Ada, meaning possibly more than her hearers understood.

When Kingcote took his leave the ladies separated. Mrs. Clarendon had before her a dinner party at Dunsey Priors, and it was necessary to give certain orders. Mrs. Stratton took up *The Times* till tea should appear.

Ada, after pacing about the library for a quarter of an hour, took her hat and went into the open air. Her mind was disturbed in some way; the darkness of trouble was back again in her eyes. She walked among the evergreens of the shrubbery, then strayed to a seat which stood against the wall of the circular portion of the conservatory. The landscape before her was wild with the hues of a sky in which the declining sun fought against flying strips of ragged cloud. The wind was kept off from this part of the lawn, but in the distance it made a moaning over the fields. She watched a cohort of dead leaves sweeping in great curves along the side of the house.

A voice spoke very near to her. It came from within the rotunda; the stained-glass window just above her head was partly open.

"It would be infinitely better," Mrs. Clarendon was saying, "than that a man like Vincent Lacour should make a prize of her."

"But she cannot be so infatuated," returned Mrs. Stratton. "She has sense enough to understand her own position and to take care of herself. My idea is that she won't marry for some time, perhaps not at all."

There was silence, then the last speaker resumed.

"She certainly has no interest in Mr. Kingcote."

"You can't judge so speedily. I don't say that I desire it," Isabel added with an uncertain voice. "But I am sure it would be a happy thing."

"Then why not desire it?"

"I don't know, I can't quite explain. And I half think she *has* an interest in him; but then—poor Ada!"

"She isn't so ugly as she was," remarked Mrs. Stratton's matter-of-fact voice. "I notice that distinctly."

Ada rose and walked away with quick steps. At the corner of the house, as she passed it to reach the front door, a great gust of wind met her, and a troop of dry crackling leaves swarmed about her feet and dress; she bent her head and hastened on, not staying till she had reached her bedroom. There she stood, just within the door, motionless and purposeless. Her face was pale, her lips set at their hardest and cruelest. When at length she stirred, it was to go to the glass and view herself. She turned away with a laugh, no pleasant one.

As Isabel came downstairs a few minutes before the time for which the carriage had been

ordered, she saw Ada standing in the doorway of the library.

"Don't, of course, sit up for me, Ada," she said.

"I will not. But I should be glad to speak to you now, if you could spare me a moment."

Isabel gazed, surprised at her tone.

"Certainly," she acceded, and passed into the library. Ada closed the door behind her. Isabel was resplendent in her evening costume; her pure, shapely neck and shoulders gleamed above the dark richness of her robe, the gold and jewels made worthy adornment of her beauty. Her colour a trifle heightened, her eyes lustrous with foresight of homage, her white, womanly brows crowned with the natural tiara of her hair—fine and rich still as in her girlhood—the proud poise of her small and perfect head, these things were lovelier to-night than on the day when her picture had been painted as a young bride. Maturity had rewarded her with its dower, which so few dare count upon. To-night she was a woman whom men of ripe experience, men of the world, would take for herself, asking no wealth but that of her matchless charm, a woman for whom younger and more passionate hearts would break with longing,

"What is it, Ada?" she asked in a voice of concern.

"This, Mrs. Clarendon. You rightly required of me that I should keep secret no step that affected us both. I wish to tell you that I have accepted an offer from Mr. Lacour—that I am going to be married to him."

She spoke neither hurriedly nor vehemently. The only measure of her feeling was in the words she used, the plainest and directest which came into her mind.

Isabel regarded her steadily for a moment. The look was grave, not hostile. Her eyes were dulled a little, her cheeks less warm, the jewels on her breast rose and fell; but she mastered the emotions which such an announcement could not but cause, forced back that cold, heavy flood which just touched her heart, held her own against the onset of fears.

"You have well considered this, Ada?"

Her hand sought the nearest chair, but she resisted the need of seating herself, merely rested her gloved fingers on the back.

"Yes, I have given it all the consideration that is necessary," was Ada's reply, less self-controlled than her last speech.

"But why do you tell me in this way?" Isabel inquired, when she had again regarded

the girl's pale anguish. "What has happened ? What has offended you ?"

"I have said all that I wished to say, Mrs. Clarendon," continued the other, regardless, seeming not to hear what was asked of her. "Please to tell me whether I am free to act, whether, as I am still under your authority, you will use it or not to oppose my marriage?"

"I cannot understand you, Ada. Why do you speak to me so harshly ? What unkindness have I been guilty of, and so recently ?"

She stopped, her eyes fell, a thought seemed to strike her.

"Have I *said* anything to hurt you ?"

Ada made a nervous movement, then spoke more calmly.

"I should not allow anything you say to influence my actions. Will you please tell me what I wish to know ?"

"I shall offer no opposition of that kind," Isabel said. "You are old enough to think and act for yourself. If you had come and told me of this in a friendly way I should no doubt have used the privilege of my age and experience—"

"To tell me what you have already on several occasions said indirectly," broke in the girl, again passionate. "Thank you ; I can make all such reflections for myself."

"I think you are unjust to me, Ada," said Mrs. Clarendon, in a lowered voice. Her fingers were now grasping the chair, instead of resting upon it. "When you have had time to reflect I am sure you will speak to me differently."

Ada stood silent.

"You propose to be married shortly?" Isabel asked, joining her hands together before her.

"As soon as will suit your convenience, Mrs. Clarendon."

"Pray do not consult that."

She could not hold back this little note of resentment, and, having uttered it, she turned and left the room. As she drew the door to, a servant approached to say that the carriage waited.

"I shall not want it," Isabel replied shortly; "let it go back."

She moved to the foot of the stairs, and in doing so, had to pass the drawing-room door, which stood open. Mrs. Stratton was within. Hearing the rustle of Isabel's dress she came forward.

"Ready?" she said; and added with a smile, "pray remember me to Lord Winterset; he is sure to be there."

Isabel was pale now. She stood with one

foot on the stairs and a hand pressed against her side. For a moment she looked strangely into her friend's face, then turned and called to the footman, who was in the doorway of the house.

"Ward, stop the carriage!"

"What's this?" inquired Mrs. Stratton, looking puzzled. Only an extreme occasion would have called alarm to that heroic lady's face.

"I sent the carriage away," Isabel explained. "I had a faintness — thought I wouldn't go. It has gone! I shall be late."

"You certainly don't look very well. A glass of sherry, dear——?"

"No, no; it has gone. Don't sit up for me, Rose. Good-bye, dear."

They kissed each other, and Mrs. Clarendon rustled to her carriage.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. SALTASH of Dunsey Priors was, by profession, a master of fox-hounds ; in his leisure, Member of Parliament. He had won the county, in the Conservative interest, on the death of Mr. Clarendon, and proved an extremely useful man. His specialty consisted in “pairing” with Members of the opposite party. In his graver pursuit he held a high place, his knowledge and zeal being brought into brilliant evidence by the wealth which enabled him to entertain sumptuously those leaders of society whose appreciation grows keen on a satisfied palate. Essentially a country gentleman, he lived almost entirely at the Priors, a fine old dwelling of considerable archæological interest ; known, among other things, for its piece of Roman pavement, discovered by Mr. Saltash himself, in the building of new stables. During the hunting season, he

gathered at his table a succession of English and foreign notabilities. Half the Cabinet had been known to meet in festivity at Dunsey Priors, and men from other lands, desirous of studying British social life, were directed thither as to one of the most fruitful fields of observation. The misfortune of the house was, that it contained no son and heir ; Miss Irene Saltash was her parent's only child, and she, as we have seen, had degenerated from the type whereby her father desired to be represented. She did not even hunt, and was given over to ecclesiastical interests, which Mr. Saltash, utterly at a loss to account for, qualified with no reticence as condemned tomfoolery. Whether it was she who had infected Lady Florence Cootes with this singular frenzy, or who was the sufferer by contagion from Lord Winterset's daughter, could not clearly be determined. At all events, she had it not from her mother. Mrs. Saltash possessed that solidity of physique and sterling commonplaceness of character which are, perhaps, the best qualifications of a country hostess. With every endowment of an admirable cook and housekeeper, the addition of aristocratic descent made her dulness respectable. She exacted nothing from her guests but the enjoyment of the fare she had provided ; satisfied repose was the note of her conversation.

It was rather a large party to-night at the Priors ; Mrs. Clarendon, arriving a few minutes after the dinner-hour, entered a great room in murmurous with conversation, and striking in effects of costume ; the men were in pink. The announcement of her name turned all faces to the door ; male eyes glimmered with passive and polite satisfaction, those of the opposite sex wandered a little about the company. There were very few present who had not the pleasure of acquaintance with the Lady of Knightswell ; greetings were abundant and cordial. It was a singular thing that the looks of most, after observing her, were bent, as if involuntarily, on a tall, baldish, handsome gentleman, who stood in conversation with Miss Saltash, stooping a little from his inconvenient height, and swinging an eye-glass round and round his fore-finger. This gentleman had precedence in rank, and very possibly in intellect, of all the assembled guests ; the Earl of Winterset needed no introduction to any one familiar with the photograph-shops and illustrated papers of the day. Strong in politics and social enterprise, he was no less prominent on the turf and in the hunting field ; the public had it on his own assertion that a good speech and a good horse were the prime joys of his life. Consequently he was

popular. Had he said a good book and a good horse—but he was too wise for that, though the measure of truth in the phrase would have been larger. He was, in fact, a singular combination of a critical intellect with a conservative temperament. He knew himself, could joke on the vulgarity of his ruling instincts, could despise those who, resembling him fundamentally, lacked the refinement of his superstructure.

Whilst conversing affably with Irene Saltash on the subject of a recent Ritualist trial, Lord Winterset's eyes strayed to the group amid which stood Mrs. Clarendon. He pursed his lips, held his head on one side, in seeming reflection upon an argument Miss Saltash had just advanced, then nodded gravely three times. But Irene had to ask twice for an answer to a question she was putting. Before she received it, dinner was announced.

The happy man to whose lot it fell to conduct Isabel was a certain Mr. Ladbroke Ruff, foxy from the summit of his cranium to the sole of his feet; there were titled dames present, otherwise Mr. Ruff would scarcely have been so honoured. The musicians' gallery in the old feasting hall was occupied by a band which discoursed old English strains; Mr. Ruff discoursed foxes. His "place" was in

Leicestershire ; a week's visit to his old friend Saltash was detaining him in this less interesting county. His talk was of "oxers," of "bull-finches," and of "raspers"; he overflowed with genial reminiscences of the Quorn, the Pytchley, and the Cottesmore. A certain "hog-maned chestnut" of his came in for a vast amount of praise.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "one of *the* very finest things in the way of a run that I remember! Forty-eight minutes, Mrs. Clarendon —on my word of honour, forty-eight minutes without a check, and a kill in the open. That was the day when poor Lewin Copstake broke both his legs. Ah! you know Copstake? Delighted, delighted! A mare he would ride—not up to the country; kneed the rails just in front of me, and came down a cracker."

Mrs. Clarendon related a similar incident from her own experience, giving Mr. Ruff an opportunity to get through an *entrée*.

"You don't say so, you don't say so! Extraordinary recklessness! By-the-bye, you know Mrs. Scarlett Slapton? Know *of* her, to be sure. Who doesn't?—ha, ha! Which season was it? Oh, she had a clever flyer—Meg Merrilies, bought from Lord Wakefield,

I believe. I shall never forget one day in December, '72—yes, '72—with the Quorn."

Then followed excited particulars. "The fox broke for —," "a burning scent," "never dwelt between — and —," "had our work cut out to live the pace,"—and so on.

Isabel talked eagerly; the flush had come back to her cheeks, her gaiety was inexhaustible. She ate little, however, and only touched with her lips a glass of champagne. Her answers now and then were a trifle wide of the mark, but she never failed in outward attentiveness. Mr. Ruff probably did not catch the sigh of relief with which she at length obeyed the signal to rise.

Mrs. Bruce Page got to her side in the drawing-room, and chattered with accustomed energy. Isabel encouraged her, heedless of subjects; the advantage was that a word or two put in edgewise every few minutes sufficed to this lady's colloquial demands, and at present Isabel did not feel capable of taking a more active part in conversation.

"You know," said the gossipier, after exhausting all other topics, "that the boy Vincent has settled down at length in the most orderly way."

"Mr. Lacour?" Isabel asked, watching the speaker's face.

"Yes. He is becoming exemplary; reads law all day, like the good boy he ought to be. I'm *so* glad, for—to tell you the truth——"

She stopped in hesitation, a most unusual thing. Isabel looked inquiringly, but with pre-occupied countenance.

"To tell you the truth," Mrs. Bruce Page resumed, ruffling her fan, "I have been a little anxious about my eldest girl. I dare say you have noticed my eagerness to get Vincent settled in some way? There is no reason in the world why it shouldn't come to something, *some* day, you know; but for the *present*——"

"Does it amount to an engagement?" Isabel asked, rather bluntly, but still without much show of interest.

"Oh, my dear, nothing so premature as that. In fact, I ought not to have breathed a syllable, but to *you*!"

Mrs. Bruce Page put her head on one side, and looked fascinatingly. Isabel reflected, seemed about to put another question, altered her mind and said to herself:

"Now what is the woman's precise object in telling me that—that fib?"

They gossiped a little on sundry other topics, then, another lady coming up, Isabel

withdrew to a more retired part of the room. The windows were deep recesses, comfortably cushioned, with a heavy, shadowing curtain on each side ; in one of these retreats she established herself, watching those who moved about before her. Soon she ceased consciously to watch, her gaze grew fixed, her features made of themselves a mask woefully unlike Isabel Clarendon.

" You are not looking yourself to-night, dear Mrs. Clarendon," said the voice of Lady Florence Cootes, as that playful young religionist crouched on a stool by Isabel's side. " Have you a headache ? "

" Yes, a little. No matter, I shall hunt to-morrow, Flo, and that always sets me up."

" Oh, I'm sure I hope so. Have you seen father yet ? "

" Seen him, but not spoken," Isabel returned, seeming to regard a lady who stood near. " I rather thought this troublesome news from Egypt would have taken him up to town."

" Oh, he's like you, he won't miss his hunting to-morrow ! "

The gentlemen entered the room, and Lady Florence went off to the warmer regions. In her recess Isabel was conscious of some one moving gradually towards her, stopping here

and there to exchange a few words, often glancing about him, slowly but surely moving her way. A dreadful nervousness took hold of her ; she wished to quit her place, to stir, to breathe freely away from the shadowing curtain, but she could not rise. She was in terror lest some flagrant weakness should entirely overcome her, an hysterical burst of tears, or a fit of faintness. Indeed, the latter seemed imminent ; she could not fan herself. Just then Lord Winterset perceived her, and at his recognising smile her agitation suddenly calmed.

" Well, my fair enemy ! " he exclaimed, sinking on the cushion by her side. " How long it seems since we had an opportunity of quarrelling ! You have been at Knightswell through the autumn, I understand."

" With the exception of a week or two. You have been travelling."

" Nothing to speak of ; Spain, and a peep at Algiers."

Isabel put some questions which led to talk of the countries he had visited. He talked well, with a pleasantly graphic manner, and in a tone of good-humoured criticism, the tone of a man who had no illusions, and who made every allowance for the defective construction of the world. Dropping gradually upon one

elbow, that nearest to his companion, he played with the seals on his watch-guard, and let the current of his descriptive eloquence glide into any pleasant channel which offered itself. One or two stories of adventures he had met with were recounted very gracefully—one, at least, was just saved by its manner from being the kind of thing better suited to the club than the drawing-room. Isabel laughed freely.

"How is it," he asked pleasantly, "that no one I know has your secret of laughter? You laugh with such complete naturalness and enjoyment, and yet it is only a delightful smile accompanied by music. I should not like to say that any lady's laughter is unmusical, but the smile is shockingly spoilt. Poor Flo, for instance, laughs most deplorably. Many ladies know the difficulty, and never venture on a laugh at all; alas, they grin!"

Isabel laughed again, though not quite as before.

"What have you to report of the Spanish ladies?" she asked.

"Beautiful; some I saw beautiful exceedingly; but their complexion too hot. I seemed to feel the need of fresh air. The northern type is my ideal; faces which remain through a lifetime fresh as a flower, which exhale the coolness of an early summer morning. They

are graceful, but I often thought of a certain English lady, who has more natural grace of bearing than any one of them."

He has fixed his look upon her; Isabel tried to make some light response, but her voice failed.

"By-the-bye," he asked, "Flo gave you that message of mine—a message I sent from Seville?"

"About the winner of the Two Thousand? Oh yes; I was duly humiliated. How *could* I have erred in a matter of such moment!"

"You remember—there was a wager."

"Was there?"

"Certainly. You have not forgotten the terms?"

Isabel held her fan by its two ends, and, as if to recollect, pressed it across her forehead. There was a terrible throbbing there; the cool ivory was very pleasant.

"I must claim payment," Lord Winterset pursued playfully, whilst he glanced about him to see that neighbours were minding their business. "You remember it was to be anything I chose to ask for."

"Lord Winterset! How foolish! There was really no wager at all; that was a mere joke, a piece of nonsense."

"Indeed, I did not regard it as anything of

the kind," he continued imperturbably, still fingering his seals. "I knew perfectly well that I should win, and I knew just as well what payment I should beg for."

Her beautifully gloved hand rested on its open palm by her side ; there was pressure on it, the nerves were strung. She gazed straight before her and saw nothing.

Lord Winterset looked at the hand, and touched it with two fingers.

"That is what I ask," he said, just audibly.

Isabel drew the hand back to her lap, then faced him, with a great effort of self-control.

"I cannot answer you at once, Lord Winterset," she said, almost calmly, though in very truth the words were a mere buzzing in her own ears. "Not to-night. Grant me a day or two."

"Is that necessary ?"

"It is—indeed it is ! I can say nothing whatever to-night. You must not interpret my behaviour at all."

"We hunt together to-morrow. May I see you in the evening ?"

"Yes, after the hunt. I will answer you then. May I, please, be left to myself now ?"

"Till to-morrow evening."

Lord Winterset smiled, bowed to her with informal grace, and passed to the nearest group.

In a few moments, Isabel too moved away. She had but to appear in the centre of the room to attract half-a-dozen loiterers. Never had her social instincts triumphed as they did now; never had she governed herself with such perfection of skill. For five minutes she was an enchantress. Then she drew aside, and presently had disappeared.

At the appointed time and place, Kingcote saw the carriage pulling up for him, Edgar Stratton having ridden his pony on before. It was a dull morning, but perfect for hunting purposes, as Mr. Vissian declared when Kingcote chatted with him for a moment in front of the rectory. The two ladies seemed in excellent spirits; they wore their habits, ready to mount the horses which would have reached Salcot before them. Mrs. Clarendon pressed Kingcote's hand warmly when he had taken his seat opposite her, held it a moment longer than was necessary, indeed, and looked with earnestness into his face. The night had been sleepless for her, but whatever traces her watching might have left had at once been carried away by the air which breathed past the light-speeding vehicle. She talked and laughed without ceasing; the prospect of a delightful day appeared entirely to occupy her.

On Mrs. Stratton's making some reference to an engagement for the morrow,

"Oh, I can't look so far forward!" Isabel exclaimed. "To-day is only beginning; what is the good of remembering that it will ever come to an end?"

"That reminds me," said Kingcote, "of those stories of impious huntsmen, who wished to ride on for ever, and had the wish terribly granted."

"I am not sure that I shouldn't follow their example, whoever offered me the choice," Isabel said. "Ah, it is good to get rid of the world! To forget everything but the delight of your headlong speed!"

"At all events," said Kingcote, "it is a form of dissipation which brings no headache on the morrow."

"Now, you too talk of the morrow! Perish the word! I live in to-day. Who knows what may happen before nightfall? I may be killed."

Kingcote's ear was struck with something singular in the note of these last words. When he looked at Isabel she did not avert her eyes, but smiled with a touching familiarity.

"Have you news from London?" she asked of him unexpectedly.

"Yes; things are still bad."

"I am very sorry."

He had never heard conventional politeness so sweetly expressed ; there was a real sorrow in her voice.

Arrived at the scene of the meet, at the end of the main street of Salcot, the ladies at once mounted their hunters and mixed with pink-coated men, who were present in considerable numbers. Kingcote drew to a little distance from the crowd of villagers, and, when a move was made to covert, he just kept the motley troupe in sight. The ladies from Knightswell were the only representatives of their sex. When at length there was a find, and strange utterances of man and beast proclaimed the start, he saw Isabel turn round in her saddle, and, to the last moment, wave her hand to him. Then he went back to find the carriage.

A heaviness weighed upon him during the drive home, and for some hours afterwards. It was not the ordinary depression which he had to struggle with day after day, but a feeling which would not yield itself to analysis, which vanished when he questioned himself, yet was back again as soon as he relapsed into vague musing. The white face and waved hand of Isabel Clarendon, that last glimpse he had had of her, would not go

from before his mind's eye ; her speech and her manner assailed his memory with indefinable suggestions. It was as if he had lacked discernment at the time, as if he ought to have gathered something which escaped him. He was impatient for another opportunity of observing her, and when would that come ? For the first time he felt that it would be impossible to let day after day go by without approaching her. Why had he not used more liberally her invitation to give her his confidence ? He had been too reticent, had failed to say a hundred things which now rang in his head. He could not put off the irrational fear that there might be no other chance of speaking freely with her, that something would interpose between her and himself, the something which already cast this shadow upon his imagination.

It was nonsense ! Had she not waved her hand to him as she could only do to a friend whom she regarded very kindly ? Was it not an assurance of meeting again, and with strengthened friendship ? Yet it haunted him with good-bye.

About four o'clock he could bear his solitude no longer, and set out to walk towards the rectory. He was near the door, when he saw the figure of Mr. Vissian running towards

him from the village street. His surprise at the sight increased when the rector drew near enough to show a face stricken with alarm.

"Have you heard anything, Kingcote?" the clergyman gasped forth. "Are you coming to tell me something?"

"No; what should I tell you? What is the matter?"

"Great God! They say in the village that Mrs. Clarendon has been brought home dead—killed in a fall!"

They stared at each other.

"I daren't go in and tell my wife," went on Mr. Vessian, in a hoarse whisper. "I must go up to the house at once."

"I must come with you."

"Do, that's a good fellow. Let me—let me lean on your arm. Pooh! I must have more self-control than this. It came like a stunning blow on the head; I all—all but dropped!"

Tears were streaming down his cheeks; his voice choked. Kingcote felt his arm quiver.

"I can't believe it! I *won't* believe it!" the rector pursued, crying like a child at last. "An accident, but not killed—great Heaven, no!"

I never had such a ghastly shock in my life. One moment, Kingcote ; I am ashamed to pass the lodge like this. I never thought I should be so weak. But if it were my own wife I scarcely could feel it more. I pray to Almighty God that it may be a mistake ! ”

The lodge was vacant.

“ They’re up at the house,” said Mr. Vissian, under his breath. “ Oh, that looks bad ! That dear, dear lady — it cannot be, Kingcote ! ”

Kingcote walked on in perfect silence, his looks on the ground, no muscle of his face moving. He did not seem to hear his companion’s talk. It was just beginning to rain ; drops pattered on the dead leaves which lay about the grass. Kingcote heard the sound ; he could never afterwards hear it without the return of this hour in terrible vividness. The air seemed stifling ; perspiration came out on him as he walked. At length the rector had ceased to speak. The drive grew moist, and rain splashed upon it ; on the dead leaves the rain still pattered.

As they were entering the garden they met the porter on his way back to the lodge.

“ What has happened ? ” Mr. Vissian asked, catching his arm and waiting with

dread for an answer. "An accident ; a bad accident ?"

"Yes, sir ; a bad fall," the man replied.

"She is alive ?"

"Thank God, sir, it's not so bad as that."

He went on to explain that the horse had breasted a fence and rolled over, inflicting grave injuries upon its rider. The accident had occurred not three miles away. Mrs. Clarendon had first been removed to a cottage, then brought home by carriage as soon as she recovered consciousness. Mrs. Stratton was with her. The doctor had just arrived, and another from London had been telegraphed for.

"I think I'll go in and hear the doctor's report," Mr. Vissian said.

"May I wait for you at the rectory ?" asked Kingcote.

"Yes ; but I beg of you, not a word to my wife ; unless, of course, some one has spread the news ; not a word else, Kingcote. You don't know the effect it will have upon her. I beg you to be cautious."

Kingcote retraced his steps through the rain. Overtaking the porter, he got such further details as the man could furnish. Then he went on to the rectory. Mrs. Vissian had

heard nothing. He entered the study and awaited the rector's arrival.

The three sat together through the evening. Even in its modified form, the news was bad enough. Mr. Vissian softened it a little in telling his wife. She, good-hearted creature, shed many tears. Percy, when he heard what had happened, said nothing ; but his imagination evidently became very busy : he sat on the hearth-rug before the fire, till at length a question shaped itself.

"Has Mrs. Clarendon hurt her face ?" he asked.

"I think not," replied his father.

"It won't be altered ? It'll be the same as it was before ?"

"I hope so, my boy."

Percy sighed, and returned quietly : "I'm glad of that."

At ten o'clock Mr. Vissian walked over to the lodge to make inquiries. The doctor, he heard, had just gone away, but would return during the night. Mrs. Clarendon lay unconscious.

Shortly after hearing this, Kingcote took leave of his friends. He found it raining hard, not a glimpse of light in heaven. Instead of turning homewards, he went across to the gates

of Knightswell. Just as he reached them they were being thrown open, and he heard the sound of a vehicle coming down the drive. It was a trap, with two men ; they drove away in the direction of Salcot.

“Who was that ?” Kingcote asked of the porter, as the gates closed again.

“Lord Winterset, sir,” was the reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE spreading of the news in private channels and by newspaper paragraphs brought numbers of people on missions of inquiry to Knightswell. For several days the life of little Winstoke had its central point of interest at the lodge, where the humbler of Mrs. Clarendon's friends, the village people and the peasantry, who knew so much of her kindness, incessantly sought information as to her progress. For nearly a week it was all evil rumour, the sufferer could only be reported "Very much the same." During that week Lord Winterset thrice made the journey from London to see Mrs. Stratton, and receive the fullest details. The people from Dunsey Priors, the Bruce Pages, and a procession of county families were, in one way or another, represented daily. Not least anxious of those who presented themselves was Robert Asquith, who came post haste from Paris, where he was spending a few weeks in

fault of anything better to do. After remaining for a day at Knightswell, he presented himself at Winstoke Rectory, and got Mr. Vissian to promise him a daily bulletin.

But the point of danger was passed, and Isabel's natural strength helped her through the suffering which preceded convalescence. The special prayer which Mr. Vissian had read forth on two Sundays, was, on the third, commenced with a phrase of thanksgiving. Robert Asquith, opening his Winstoke letter every morning with fingers which trembled in spite of all his efforts, smiled with satisfaction at length, and, though he disliked travelling, set off to make another call at Knightswell. Mrs. Stratton assured him that all was well, that Isabel had begun to sleep soundly through the night without artificial aids, and that she was capable of attending, for short periods, whilst Miss Warren read to her. At the mention of Ada's name, Robert turned a sharp look on the lady.

"Ah, Miss Warren reads to her, does she?"

"Yes. She has been admirable all the time."

These two had made acquaintance for the first time on the occasion of Asquith's former

visit, but already they met with an air of mutual understanding.

"I suppose you have heard my name from Mrs. Clarendon?" Robert had asked in the course of their first conversation; and the lady had given an affirmative, with a smile which might or might not have meaning.

"If Miss Warren has been admirable," Robert remarked, "you, Mrs. Stratton, have been indispensable. What on earth should we have done without you?"

"Oh, I have done nothing, except keep guard. But I shall carry her off as soon as I can."

"Whither?"

"First of all to my own home. I live at present at Chislehurst, and have a house much too big for me. Colonel Stratton will probably be home before Christmas, and we shall make a party. I wish you could make it convenient to join us for a few days."

"It's very good of you," Robert replied with deliberate gratitude. "If all goes according to your expectation, I will come with pleasure."

They parted the best of friends, looking mutual compliments.

"Now, why couldn't Isabel be open with

me?" mused Mrs. Stratton, after he had gone. "Several things begin to be a little clearer, I fancy."

"A capital little woman," meditated Robert, on his way to the station. "I shouldn't wonder if her friendship prove valuable."

And all three weeks it rained, rained with scarcely a day's intermission. If the new road to Salcot was a mere mud-track, the state of the old road can be conjectured; its deep ruts had become watercourses, its erewhile grassy prominences were mere alluvial wastes. The piece of sward before the cottage gradually turned to swamp; the oak torso stood black with drenching moisture, its clinging parasite stems hung limp, every one of its million bark grainings was a channel for rain-drops. Behind, the copse was represented by the shivering nakedness of lithe twigs, set in a dark, oozy bed of decaying leaves and moss and fungi. Sometimes the rain fell straight from a gray sky without a rack feature from end to end, till all Nature seemed to grow of one colour, and the space between morning and evening was but a wan twilight of indistinguishable hours. Sometimes there glimmered at midday a faint yellowness, a glimpse of free heaven athwart thinning vapour, a smile too pale to

hold forth promise. Sometimes there came towards nightfall a calling from the south-west, the sky thickened with rolling battalions over-flashed at instants with an angry gleam, and blasts of fury drove the rain level with the reeking earth. Then there would be battle till dawn, followed, alas! by no glorious victory of the sun-god, but with more weeping of the heavens and sighing of the worn-out winds.

In spite of the fearful weather, Kingcote walked incessantly. The solitude of his cottage was hideous. Every little familiar sound—the rattling of a window or a door, the endless drip of rain, the wind moaning in the chimney—became to him the voice of a tormenting demon. He loathed the sight of every object around him ; the damp odour which hung about the place and greeted him whenever he entered from the open air brought a feeling of sickness ; he dreaded the hour of going upstairs to the bare bed-chamber, where the cold seized him as in a grip, and the darkness about his candle was full of floating ghosts. The sound of the rain, as he lay longing for the sleep that would not come, weighed upon his spirit to the point of tears ; he wept in his gulf of wretchedness. He could not read ; the hours of the day would have been interminable but for the regular

walk, which killed a portion of time. And occasionally he could spend an evening at the rectory.

Only a man capable of settling at Wood End as Kingcote had done would have been capable of living thus through these late weeks of the year. It needed a peculiar nature to go through with such self-torment—a nature strangely devoid of energy, and morbidly contemplative. He would not admit to the Vissians that he suffered in any way ; he even visited them less often than he otherwise would have done, that he might not appear to seek refuge in their house. Bodily ill-health had much to do with his singular state—ill-health induced by long mental suffering and the unwholesome conditions of his life ; it aggravated his moral disorder and made him physically incapable of the step he would otherwise have been driven to. To quit the cottage and return, if only for a time, to London, he had persuaded himself was impossible ; whilst Isabel Clarendon lay on her sick-bed he could not go away. During the first two weeks, he himself had fallen little short of grave illness ; his nights were feverish : once he found himself standing at the gates of Knightswell, without being able to summon consciousness of his walk from home, the hour being just before dawn. Upon

this had followed lassitude ; he heard almost with indifference of Isabel's improved condition, and for a few days did not care to move from his fireside. The fever left him, however, and mental disquietude took its place. A source of misery and exasperation was the number of people he knew to be calling at Knightswell ; the multitude of her friends excited his jealousy ; he himself was of no account among them, the very least of these people, who made their conventional visits and left their respectable cards, was more to her than he. Even if a voice assured him that it was not so, he refused to listen ; the fascination of self-torture will not brook a moment's consoling. He called twice, at long intervals, partly because it was not decent to neglect the duty, partly because a longing to draw near to her anguished him ; but each time he came away maddened with jealous suspicions. The servant had stood across the door, as if to bar his possible entrance, and had replied to his question with supercilious negligence ; the very windows of the house had looked upon him with the contemptuousness of a vacant stare. Of such nothings it was his fate to make hours of suffering. The most absurd thoughts possessed him. She would return to the world a changed woman ; even if she cared ever to receive him

again, it would be with the cold politeness of a slight acquaintance. She would associate him always with that day's meet, and the thought of him would be always something to dismiss from her mind as painful. A thousand such fantastic webs did he spin in his brain, each an hour's distress. Yet nothing could have taken him from the neighbourhood. To go now would be to have seen her for the last time, to make her henceforth only a name in his memory, and he felt that death would be preferable to that.

Time lost its reality. Sunday he knew, because of the church bells ; of other days he kept no count, one was even as another. But it befel at length that the rain ceased, and the first sunlight which awoke him at his bedroom windows was like the touch of a soft, kind hand. It brought to his mind all pleasant and beautiful things : the sound of her voice, the clear vision of her countenance, the white waving of her hand as she rode away, the promise that was in one and all of these. Upon sunlight followed frost ; at night-time a dark blue heaven with burnished stars, and the gleaming rime of early hours. The spirit of the healthful air breathed upon him, and gave his blood fresh impulse. He heard that she

had left her bed, was all but able to sit up through the day. Might he not before long hope to see her?

One Sunday morning as he sat at breakfast —it was a strange-looking meal, laid out upon a bare deal table, much the kind of breakfast that the labouring men in other cottages sat down to—a shadow passed before the window, and there followed two sharp blows with a stick at his door. It was the postman's knock ; Kingcote started up eagerly to answer. There were only two probable correspondents, his sister and Gabriel, and it was some time since he had heard from either. But the letter which the man put into his hand had travelled a shorter distance ; it bore only the Winstoke mark. The handwriting he did not know, but it was a woman's, and, it seemed to him, written under some infirmity. In his agitation, he made scant reply to the postman's remark about the weather ; yet he noticed that it had just begun to snow, and that the light flakes were silver in sunlight. It was not a letter—a mere note of one side, but it ended with the name of Isabel Clarendon.

“ DEAR MR. KINGCOTE,

“ Why have you not been to see me ? Several people who brought me nothing but their dulness have found their way here the last few days. Will you come to-morrow at eleven—if you can miss Mr. Vissian’s sermon for once ? ”

The snow fell, but from a rift of glory up above streamed one broad beam, which made the earth shimmer. Presently began the Winstoke bells ; their music was carried off to the south by a shrewd wind, whose task it was to bake the ground that the snow might lie. Wind and snow had their way ; the sun drew back and veiled itself ; the white down-fall thickened, chased and whirled into frenzy by the shrilling north. The turmoil made Kingcote laugh with pleasure. When he quitted the cottage, he had to leap over a high ridge of driven snow. The oak-stump had a white cloak on its back ; the road was a smooth white surface, not a little treacherous whilst still unhardened. But there was life in the keen air, and the delight of change in the new face of each familiar thing.

It cost some stamping of the feet and shaking of upper garments before he could pass from the threshold of Knightswell into

the hall. The footman seemed prepared for his arrival, and bade him follow him up the stairs. The chief rooms of the house were all on the ground floor; Kingcote had never yet ascended. The room into which he was ushered was Isabel's boudoir, small, with only one window, daintily furnished. It caught his senses with a faint pervading perfume, a soft harmony of clear colours, a witchery of light broken by curtains and tinged with hues from gleaming surfaces; his foot was flattered by the yielding carpet. He did not at first see where she sat, for her chair was in a dim corner; besides, the fireplace intervened with its great blaze.

"I never thought you would face this terrible weather!"

"The weather? What of that? Was I not to see you at eleven?"

She might not stand yet, but both her hands were held out to him. There was a low chair not far from her; he drew it nearer and sat looking into her face. It was of an exquisite pallor, just touched on either cheek with present emotion; thinner, but only—at all events to his eyes—the more beautiful. There was an indescribable freshness in her appearance—her white neck caressed by soft lace, the lines which her hair made on the purity of her brow, her bright, just-moistened

eye, the graceful repose of her still feeble frame.

"You find me changed?" she asked, in a voice which trembled in trying to be merely mirthful.

"I see no change. You are pale, but your face is what it always was."

"You are growing stronger?" he asked, when she kept silence. "Danger is past?"

"Oh, long past!"

He hesitated for the next words.

"Wasn't it strange?" Isabel went on, regarding him with wide-eyed intimacy, which thrilled his nerves. "You remember the things I said that morning? What did you think when you heard of the accident?"

"They told me you were dead—that was the first news."

Her eyes fell before his steady look.

"I half wished it," she said. "In the moment when I knew what was coming, I had a strange hope that my words might have brought it in reality; I closed my eyes, and tried to think it would be like sleep."

"Why should *you* have such thoughts? What has life ever brought you but joy?"

"A few things not quite joyful, and which most women would find rather hard to bear. You know nothing of my story? No? Not

by chance in talking about me of late? I suppose there has been much talk about me?"

"Will you not tell me what it is you speak of? Remember that I talk to no one."

"To be sure. You are so unlike all other men. You are apart in my thoughts—you seem to be in a wholly different world from that I know. Your judgment of me will be sterner than that of mere men of the world, who take self-seeking and dishonour for granted. Yes, it will, it will!"

Her breath was caught, and nervous agitation so gained upon her weakness as almost to make her hysterical. Kingcote bent forward and imprisoned one of her hands.

"Speak calmly," he urged, in a voice just above a whisper. "Why do you agitate yourself so? Why should you tell me anything that it is painful to speak of?"

His own emotion all but overcame his power of utterance. She did not try to draw away her hand; holding it in one of his, with the other he caressed it soothingly. Isabel smiled at him.

"You are deceived in me," she pursued, becoming quieter by self-yielding. "You see only appearances. This house and all it represents is not mine; I am only allowed to use it

and to make a show till the owner claims it : everything belongs to Miss Warren."

A minor emotion like surprise could not affect Kingcote in his present mood.

"And I am to judge you sternly for not having told me that?" he asked, his veins on fire from the touch of the hand he held.

"Listen to me. When she marries I lose everything, all but an annuity of three hundred pounds. And that will be in a few weeks, as soon as I am strong enough to go in search of a new home."

"Yes? Does *that* call for my judgment?"

She trembled.

"I want to show you something, but I cannot rise to get it. Will you go for me? You see the small writing-desk on the further table?"

Kingcote rose, but with her hand still in his. He could not release it. She, with eyes turned upwards to regard him, her face flushed, her throat quivering, was as loth to be severed from his grasp. Instead of moving away, he bent and put his lips to her forehead. Then the rose-hue clothed her with maidenhood, her head fell, and he felt the pulse at her wrist leap like flame.

"Will you fetch me the desk?" she asked, without meeting his look.

He fetched it, and with a key from her pocket Isabel opened it. Below other papers she found an envelope, and from this took a photograph.

"Will you look at that?" she said, holding it to him.

Kingcote's face expressed recognition.

"This," he said, "is, I suppose, Miss Warren's father? The resemblance is very strong."

"It is a portrait of Mr. Clarendon," was her answer, given in a tone of such cold self-command that Kingcote turned to look at her with a movement of surprise.

"Mr. Clarendon?"

"I will put it away again, if you please."

He let her do so, and removed the case. When he drew near her, Isabel regarded him with a passionless face, and pointed to the chair he had risen from.

"He knew me well," she said, with a bitterness which made all her words clear-cut and her voice unshaken. "He calculated my weakness, and devised my punishment skilfully. That I should take the child and rear it to inherit his property, or else lose everything

at once. With a woman of self-respect, such a scheme would have been empty ; she would have turned away in scorn. But he knew me well ; he knew I had not the courage to go back to poverty ; that I would rather suffer through years, be the talk and pity and contempt of every one, face at last the confession to her,—all that rather than be poor again ! ”

Kingcote once more held her hand, and, when she paused, he kissed it passionately.

“ You were poor once ? ” he asked gently, tenderly.

“ That is my only excuse. We were wretchedly poor, my mother, my brother, and myself. I have been hungry often and often. We had to keep up a respectable appearance ; we starved ourselves to buy clothing and to avoid being indebted to people. I have often gone to bed—when I was a strong, growing girl—and cried because I was so hungry ; though I had just before been pretending I could eat no more, as we all of us did, poor mother as well. I was to be a governess ; but then a lady took me to London, was wonderfully kind to me, treated me as her daughter. She said”—Isabel half laughed, half cried—“ she said I was too good-looking to be a governess.”

“ Wasn’t it true ? Are you not now so

beautiful that my heart faints when I look at you?"

"If I were not so contemptible—if I deserved any recompense for what I have suffered—it would be a priceless one to hear you say so."

"Tell me more."

"I married at the end of my first season; made what was called a wonderful marriage. I hadn't a farthing, and became all at once wealthy. I caught at the best that offered; the best in the world's sense. I was old enough; I understood what I was doing. No one was to blame but myself. You saw that hard, strong, coarse face? He often looked at me as if he were coldly calculating the risks of murder; but as he got to know me better, he found better punishments. I did not disobey him. I never gave him cause for anger by word or deed; could I help it that I—that I hated him?"

The excitement was again overpowering her strength. She sobbed tearlessly.

"You shall speak no more of that," Kingcote said; "leave it all in the past; forget it, dearest."

"Am I dearest to you?" she asked, looking into his eyes with yearning tenderness. "Oh, I have never felt till now what it would be to lose wealth and the power of bestowing it!"

May I tell you, only to justify myself—to make myself better in your sight? I might so often have married, and freed myself, men to whom wealth was nothing, who would have taken me for myself: but I could not, not even to gain an honourable position. I had always the hope that I might know what love meant. I have gone through the world and enjoyed it. I have had, I suppose, something of what is called success; it left me cold. Only when you came into my life then it began to be all different. I felt that you were come to save me; you were so unlike others, you interested and attracted me as no one else ever did. You remember our first meeting in Mr. Vessian's study? I went away and could think of nothing but you; wondered what your story was, tried to understand what it was in you that affected me so strangely."

"My sovereign lady!"

"If you knew the foolish tricks I played myself! I would not face the truth; I invented all sorts of explanations and excuses when I longed to see you. It occurred to me that you might perhaps come to care for Ada. I persuaded myself that it would make me happy if you married her and became rich. And I can give you nothing!"

" You give me nothing, Isabel ? Yesterday I was the poorest creature in this world, without strength, without hope, sunk in misery ; now every pulse of my heart is happiness."

She sighed with pleasure.

" Turn your face to me, Isabel ; let me try to read it there, to believe it, to make it part of my life. Let me hear you say those three words—I do not know their sound—those three words I hunger for ! "

" Three ? Have I not said them ? Was it only in my thought ? I love you, dearest."

" Four ! And from *your* lips, whose music came to me from another sphere, so far you seemed ! You, the throned lady, the queen with the crown of loveliness ; so gracious, so good, so noble——"

" Hush ! you may not praise me. Dear, you know those words do not describe me, you know how unworthy I am."

" I will praise you whilst I have breath for speech ! What are our paltry conventional judgments ? In that I love you, you are to me a peerless woman. Have you not stooped to me from the circle of your glory ? Are you not to me embodied goodness, purity, truth ? What am I that you should love me, my soul's worship ? Yet your eyes say it, your smile

says it, your lips make golden music of the words."

She sighed again, drinking in his rapturous adoration with closed eyes.

"And you?" she asked. "When did you first love me? Did I not seem to you a very silly, empty, frivolous woman?"

"I loved your name long before I saw you. They talked to me at the rectory, and called you the Lady of Knightswell. I pictured you, and indeed not far unlike yourself; just so gracious, so bright, so gloriously a woman. I looked over to Knightswell from my window, and wondered if ever we should meet. What kindness of fate that brought me that day past the cottage!"

She was still musing over the growth of this flower in her heart.

"I knew it when the pain was over, and I could lie and think. It was all so clear to me then. I had escaped a terrible danger; but for the fall"—her voice sank—"I might never have known this happiness. I was in ceaseless fear lest you should have gone. I asked often if you had called; if you had known how I longed for your name among those who called! There was no need of occupation for me. It was quite enough to lie and think of our talks

together, to call back your voice and your look. Oh, I *longed* to send a word to you ; you were so lonely, so unhappy. All that is over now, dearest ? You will never again be comfortless ? ”

“ Dare I think that, Isabel ? ”

“ When I love you ? ”

“ That again ! ” He covered his face with his hands. “ Once more ! ”

“ With my soul I love you ! ”

“ If I could but hear that for ever ! Shall I hear it when this hour has become part of our memory, in days after this ? Dare I think of it as music that I may hear at will ? ”

“ It shall never fail you, if your ear does not weary.”

“ If my eyes weary of the light of heaven ? ”

There was silence before Isabel spoke.

“ Ada’s marriage has been postponed on account of my illness ; it would have taken place before this. When it is over, and I have discharged my duty to the end, then——”

She paused, not avoiding his gaze, but meeting it with simplest truth, her lips trembling a little.

“ I shall have my three hundred a year,” she added, almost pleadingly. “ Can we not

make it enough? Do you know that the Vissians live on less than that?"

Kingcote dropped his eyes, and spoke with embarrassment.

"To me it is wealth. For you, even alone, it would be miserable poverty. How can I accept such a sacrifice?"

"A sacrifice? Is that your measure of my love?"

He kissed her hand, then asked laughingly:

"What do you think my own income is? You dare not guess. I am richer than Goldsmith's country parson; I have full sixty pounds."

"Why, then, are we not wealthy? That is the rent of a delightful house, somewhere far away. Might we not go abroad? Would you," she added anxiously, "go abroad with me?"

"Dear, can you so change your life?"

"It *is* changed. There is no effort asked of me. I live only for you."

"Your friends?"

"My friends? One, two, three at most; those I need not lose. My acquaintances, three hundred at least; ah! let them go! It shall be a new world. What need have I of friends? *You* are my friend, my one, sole friend! I will

have no other. Oh, you will not weary of me ? I bring you so little—my ignorance, my foolish habits of thought. You will be patient with me, and help me to become more the kind of woman suitable for—for your wife ? ”

The flush in her cheeks had become steadfast ; her eyes gleamed unnaturally. Each word she spoke heightened the fever which was gaining upon her. He noticed this.

“ I have been wrong to let you talk so much,” he said gravely. “ You are tired ; you will suffer.”

“ No, I shall sleep, and with such peace in my heart as I have never known.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, and murmured words that he did not hear.

“ Is Mrs. Stratton still with you ? ” he asked.

“ At church ; it must be nearly time for her to return.”

“ And Miss Warren ? ”

“ She is reading, I suppose ; she always prefers to be alone.”

“ Dear, you are suffering.”

“ No, indeed no. Is my face worn ? Do I look—old ? ”

“ What was that word ? You are as beautiful as day.”

"You will come very soon again? I will write and tell you when."

"I dare not let you speak more."

"I am still weak," she said with a smile. Her voice was failing.

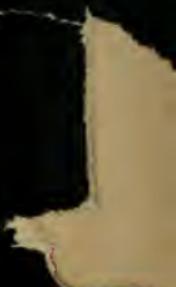
He knelt by her side, and she, bending forward with modest grace, gave him the sweetness of her lips.

The storm still raged; nothing was to be seen beyond a few yards through the white whirl. As Kingcote struggled against it with bent head, a carriage passed him, moving silently over the snow; it was bringing Mrs. Stratton from church. This made him fearless he should meet the Vissians near the rectory; he could speak with no one now; there was a voice in his ears which for his life he would not have silenced. He turned off into the trackless park, and walked in a direction which would bring him out at a lonely part of the new road. With a boy's delight he leapt through the deep snow, and fought his way against the whirlwind. He lost his bearing; the white outlines of the country were irrecognisable; there was nothing for it but to push on, and come out where he might. It was two hours at least before

he at length got into a track that he knew, and which led him homewards. He reached the cottage in complete exhaustion, chilled, feeble with hunger. Unable even to cast off his wet clothing before he had rested, he threw himself into a chair. He laughed ; it would be something to tell her when they met again.

END OF VOL. I.





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